



**BIR CHANDRA PUBLIC  
LIBRARY**







**ANTONIO  
THE GREAT LOVER**



VITALIANO BRANCATI

ANTONIO

*THE GREAT LOVER*



TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN  
BY VLADIMIR KEAN

*London*

DENNIS DOBSON LTD

*Translated from the Italian*  
IL BELL'ANTONIO

FIRST PUBLISHED IN GREAT BRITAIN IN MCMLII  
BY DENNIS DOBSON LTD, 12 PARK PLACE,  
ST JAMES'S, LONDON S.W.1  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED  
PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY  
PURNELL AND SONS, LTD, PAULTON (SOMERSET)  
AND LONDON  
636/R

## TO MY WIFE

... 'tis so then, that true felicity is possible here on earth  
as I did learn when first I gazed upon thee.'

LEOPARDI



## TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

**R**EADERS FAMILIAR WITH the southern part of Italy, from Naples downwards, and Sicily itself, will be able to appreciate the full savour of Brancati's brilliant and moving social satire.

Others may not be able to do so without an explanation of certain essential points. Casual travellers often assume that the only difference between their own people and the people of the country in which they are travelling is one of habits and superficial mannerisms. Nothing could be a greater fallacy when attempting to contrast Sicilians with people from northern and western countries. They are as different as the moon from cheese. What are some of the salient features of this divergence?

Firstly, in their general attitude to life. The Sicilian's volubility and mercurial temperament, as compared with the reticence and relative stability of the northerner, is not only a surface difference; it reflects a fundamental dissimilarity of outlook. The Sicilian is engrossed by mundane, earthy affairs: his family, his food and wine, his enjoyment of the sun and any colourful sight or parade, music and singing, and, above all, women and making love. The 'man in the street' reads little, is not what we call politically conscious—politics to him mean free entertainment and an opportunity to let off steam. In relation to the objective side of life, he is a cynic. He takes it for granted that the rich and poor are orders of nature (after all, he might get rich, too, at any moment), that all civil servants are venal, and politicians primarily

self-seeking. As to the next world, let the Church worry about that! Even the intellectual minority, almost too highly cultured, considers discussion of philosophy, poetry and ethics as a sort of intellectual parlour game, not serious and never under any circumstances to be applied to everyday life. By contrast, most northerners are potential if not actual reformers and rebels. In increasing numbers they not only think but feel that the world should be made into a better place. Perhaps the whole argument could be summed up by considering the Sicilians as passing through an early adolescent stage of the evolution of societies towards mechanisation, standardisation, improved social and political organisation. Northerners have long since emerged from this stage and reached the early adult stage of this process. The contrast is between the puzzled and worried adult and care-free adolescent. Edoardo Lentini in this book is arch-typical of the adolescent character of the adult Sicilian: throughout he is either in a state of wild exuberance or of utter black depression; there is nothing in between. Equally characteristic of the physiological phase of adolescence is the alternation between spurts of frenzied activity and complete beatific passivity. The same applies to an almost exclusive preoccupation with sex.

Secondly, in their attitude to religion. The Catholic Church dominates the whole female population from the cradle to the grave. Every act is considered in relation to the tenets of the Church. When in doubt, ask your priest! When in sin, run to your confessor and be absolved! Every woman is a devout and practising Catholic. So is the majority of the male population. The more intelligent, who pay lip service only to the faith, are usually outward conformers, either to please their wives or

mothers or because they consider it expedient. All are married and die under her aegis. Another character in the book, Ermenegildo Fasanaro, is typical of the highly educated and intelligent Sicilian, who is really a free thinker, but in moments of stress thinks nothing of confessing himself to a priest. The fact that the Church preaches submission to poverty, pain and injustice on this earth—promising compensation in the next world—plays a large part in determining the social attitude of the Sicilian.

Thirdly, in their standards of conduct. Perhaps the best example would be the attitude of the Sicilian towards conduct in war. In other countries the statement that Italians make 'rotten soldiers' is too often made and believed. Sicilians and other Italians are as brave as any other soldiers when they really believe in what they are fighting for—witness the bravery of Garibaldi's raw recruits. But the Sicilian is a realist, not a romanticist or a sentimentalist. If you have been conscripted into an army to fight for a cause which you believe to be a bad one, what more desirable and natural than to desert or get yourself taken prisoner? A Sicilian just cannot understand why such conduct is stigmatised as cowardice by the northerner, any more than the northerner can understand the enormous fuss made about Antonio's affliction, which is the central theme of this book.

This leads to the fourth point, their attitude towards sex. Sicilians consider the sexual act as the focal point of their lives. Every woman behaves as if and frankly admits that the essential purpose of her life is to be attractive to men. Every man believes that his main function is to attract as many women as possible, before and after marriage, not only to sleep with each of them but to do

it with such superlatively perfect technique that he will always be remembered as the perfect lover ! As a matter of course he boasts of his conquests to his friends. Has the southerner any greater innate capacity for sexual intercourse than the northerner ? We have no accurate means of measurement and will probably never know. But the Sicilian male undoubtedly attaches infinitely greater importance to proficiency in the performance of the act. To become proficient you must practise all the time. Hence the casual attitude to whores and brothels—so useful to keep one in training ! Constant practice, as in athletics, leads to an increased acquired capacity. Thus the question of greater innate capacity becomes academic. The Sicilian can do it better and more often. To do so is his duty to himself, to the female population, to his family and to his community. If he fails to be able to do so, as in the case of Antonio, it is an authentic tragedy.

Finally, in their addiction to 'rude' language. Some readers may find some of the expressions used in this book a trifle disturbing or shocking. They should remember that Brancati is a social chronicler and would be false to his function if he made his Sicilians talk like the characters in an Edwardian drawing-room comedy. In the social atmosphere which has been described, Sicilians spend a considerable portion of their time gossiping about the facts of life. As they have no inhibitions about the natural functions, whether excretory or copulatory, it follows that their language may sound crude to the northerner. Basically, however, there is nothing more obscene about their language than there is about a small boy happily and proudly watering the flower-bed.

V.K.

## CHAPTER ONE

'It was difficult to stop staring at him.'

SAINT-SIMON .

'And away to Saint Peter for the heavens; he shows me where the bachelors sit, and there live we as merry as the day is long.'

SHAKESPEARE

IT WAS ABOUT 1930 when the eight young Sicilians came to Rome. They were bachelors, and each settled in furnished rooms in a quiet part of the city. Sooner or later they all dutifully visited its famous monuments. But, alas, they were ignorant of history and did not appreciate the beauty of cupolas, doorways, fountains and other masterpieces of Michelangelo and Borromini. Theirs was the roving eye of the southern male. They were too busy scanning the crowds in the hope of catching sight of another kind of beauty—feminine—to admire. They even reacted adversely to the lovely voice of the ancient bells which so delighted Shelley and Goethe. When, the morning after, a young man is trying to cool his fevered brow against the wall of his room, the gentlest vibration of the most silver-tongued bell is liable to elicit a 'Damn that bell!'

In the interests of truth, it must be confessed that these Sicilian bachelors were an ugly lot, save for one, Antonio Magnano, who was singularly good-looking. Not that the ugly ones were displeasing to women; on the contrary, in spite of their short stature, hooked noses

and the nails on their little fingers grown long so as to be able to clean out their ears, there seemed to be some strange bond between them and the entire female sex. In some inexplicable way, it was as though every woman was their accomplice in sin. At the moment of first meeting, each woman seemed to realise this and felt herself inexplicably and irrevocably compromised. It was for this reason that their conquests always savoured of blackmail in spite of the fact, which can be vouched for, that these prime young men behaved with invariable courtesy and gentleness towards the opposite sex. But then, an ugly man is perhaps the most mysterious phenomenon on this mysterious earth.

Very different, however, were the 'successes' of Antonio Magnano. In 1932 he was twenty-six years old, and his photographs, displayed in the Piazza di Spagna, made everyone stop and stare, even the middle-aged woman, laden with parcels, who dragged a tearful urchin along with the hand that had just slapped him. A poignant sweetness emanated from his olive-complexioned face; long eyelashes shadowed the delicate plane of cheek, further darkened by his heavy beard-shadow, except below the eyes, where the skin was so soft and shiny as to seem to gleam with tears. He was a taciturn young man. Even the most restless and hysterical women succumbed to his soothing influence. As they sat by his side they felt tenseness change to relaxation, and irritability to a gentle stirring of the senses; with the result that they rose from the chair to lie on the couch and, later, from the couch to lie on the bed. A superficial and envious observer might console himself by claiming that women were bored when they were with Antonio. What a delusion! They were completely dominated by him, but at

the same time deliciously at their ease; when with him they were pleasantly afire, they palpitated and throbbed, all capacity for feeling so intensified as to confound pain and pleasure, resulting in a state of indiscriminating confusion, the only state in which one dares to say aloud: I am perfectly happy!

His ugly friends respected Antonio. They might have envied and even hated him if they, too, had not been in love with him without knowing it, stimulated and infected by their own women friends. The secret of his conquests was very different from theirs, in fact quite the opposite. Theirs were snatched like a robber snatches from his victim, while those of Antonio seemed to arise from a strange comfort that he imparted to his victims. His secret fascinated them to such an extent that they set their alarms for five so that they could surprise Antonio while he was taking his morning shower. But what an unpleasant ordeal this was for them. Confronted by his splendid athlete's body, somewhat softened by the pallor of melancholy and lack of exercise, as if perpetually lime-lit from above, his friends, and especially Luigi d'Agata and Carlo Fischetti, were assailed by a sensation of malaise which only thinly disguised a feeling of acute self-disgust.

'Do you know what you look like?' they would say to him. 'You look like a newly baked biscuit!' They fell to pounding his bare shoulders, pulling the hairs on his chest and lifting his feet, but they were deeply disturbed by the feel of this strange and so undeniably superior body.

Even as a boy he had been a disturbing influence. His father and mother were obliged to realise it on 5th April 1922. That morning the maid, a young peasant,

burst into his parents' bedroom, with her face all scratched and streaked with tears.

'Holy Virgin! What have you done?' exclaimed his mother, Signora Rosaria, rescuing the breakfast tray from her trembling hands. 'What have you done? Tell me!'

The girl lowered her head and looked sideways like a nanny-goat. Finally she moaned: 'I didn't do it!'

'Then who did?' cried his mother, increasingly worried.

'Your son!' bleated the girl.

'Antonio?' shouted his father, Signor Alfio, as he swung his legs out of bed, having pulled on his woollen pants under the covers. 'I'll see to him all right so that he won't forget it in a hurry!'

There was a strained silence, and suddenly the girl collapsed on the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth. She clung to Signor Alfio's legs as if she wanted to restrain him from committing a crime. At that moment Antonio walked into the room with the sweetest and most innocent air imaginable. At once the girl released Signor Alfio's legs and, rolling over on the floor, seized Antonio's ankles. The youth appeared to be genuinely astonished and looked inquiringly at his parents for an explanation of the scene. Meanwhile the girl had laid her face on Antonio's feet, after having torn off his slippers and thrown them aside, so that she could weep over and rub her cheeks against his bare skin.

'Forgive me!' she howled. 'Forgive me! I'm a liar, a liar and a pig!'

The girl was so beside herself that his father had considerable difficulty in wrenching Antonio away from her.

His mother finally learned the truth when she was alone with the girl. For five nights this comparatively simple country girl had been creeping out of her bedroom merely to stand outside Antonio's door. It had been the conflict between desire and fear within her that had caused her to claw her face and breasts.

'Who set my blood on fire?' she moaned, as she told her story. 'Where did such heat come from?' She bit her hand in her agitation.

Her mistress was so disturbed by the tale that she immediately went to see her confessor in the little Church of the Madonna in the Via Sant' Euplio. She relayed the story to him.

'Hadn't I better get rid of the girl, Father Giovanni?' she asked, almost in tears. 'I could get a boy for the housework.'

'If your son has evil thoughts he will always find some way of doing harm to women!' The old priest tapped his snuff-box twice and frowned. He would not admit that Antonio could be altogether without blame in the matter.

'But couldn't one advise the women to . . . er . . .'

'To what?' asked the priest irritably.

'Well—to behave more—more decorously with him. . . .'

'Are you acquainted with all the women your son will ever know?' asked the old priest, glaring at her. 'Can God send an angel to you every time—to warn you—yes, every time your son begins to take an interest in a woman?'

'Then what shall I do?' she asked.

The priest knew only too well that his feelings towards Antonio were scarcely Christian, but he had unfortun-

ately lost his temper and could not resist the temptation of giving in to his baser instincts.

'You should ask God to take your son to Him,' he said to the woman, 'and that quickly.'

Signora Rosaria nearly fainted with fright at this suggestion and her sobs shook the painted wooden angel against which she was leaning.

'When I'm preaching,' continued the priest, 'and your son is sitting at the back of the church, the women spend their time looking round at him. It's scandalous!'

In fact, if Antonio was sitting near the door of the church he only had to move his chair or cough to deprive the pulpit of the attention of the whole feminine congregation.

'Death is nothing for the true Christian to fear,' added the priest. 'On the contrary, when it plucks us in the flower of youth it is a gift from heaven. . . . But it is not for us to suggest to God the best way to preserve a young man like Antonio in a state of grace and'—raising his voice—'to preserve others from being led into temptation. For the worst thing we can do, dear signora, is not to damn ourselves by damning a fellow creature over whom we have no jurisdiction! Pray to God, signora. In his infinite wisdom he will find a way to mitigate the diabolical beauty of your son without transforming it into *pulvis et umbra*!'

The signora crossed herself when the priest pronounced the word 'diabolical' and rose to her feet. The poor woman's extreme pallor would have impressed the priest had it not been masked by all the gold in the church and the bright yellow light that streamed across it.

'How do you think my Antonio can be changed by the Lord,' she asked hesitantly.

The priest made no reply, and she walked on beside him. She listened to his footsteps with the absorption of one who is completely exhausted. When they reached the door of the church, the priest raised his hand, still glistening with holy water.

‘He might lose his sight!’ he murmured. The signora muffled a shriek with the back of her hand. ‘Come here!’ said the priest, once more giving way to indignation. He led the signora into the sacristy, muttering unintelligibly. Then he drew back his lips in what could only be described as a hideous snarl and burst out with: ‘Do you realise, do you realise that out of twenty girls from good families who use me as their confessor, ten . . . yes, no less than ten have sinned against God because they have become obsessed with your son and think of him in a manner that is not exactly compatible with their upbringing?’

‘Three days after he had confessed my niece, Monsignor Cavallaro came to me and said: “Brother, you must arrange that Rita does not see young Magnano too often!” “Friend,” I answered, feeling worried, “do you know something definite?” “I know nothing, nothing about anything,” replied the monsignor. “How could I know anything, I am just a poor priest? But the Lord put these words in my mouth and I have passed them on to you.” A most worthy man, Monsignor Cavallaro! Your husband should recommend him to the Archbishop. . . . But does it seem right to you?’—and his voice rose louder and louder—‘that on Sunday’s, in church, the daughters of our best families think that the high altar is located wherever Antonio happens to be sitting?’

Signora Rosaria went home to wait for her son. She sat, wringing her hands, in a state of indescribable

anxiety, as if her son had gone to do battle with the archangel Gabriel. When her son returned, wearing spectacles, fear became panic.

'You're going blind!' shrieked the good woman.

Antonio gave her one of his sweetest smiles and explained that the lenses were not magnifying ones, but that he was wearing them simply to make himself look more grown-up.

His mother clasped him to her bosom, devoutly praying to the saints in heaven that all women who might in the future embrace her darling boy might do so only with the sentiments that she herself felt at that moment.

But, alas, her prayer was not to be answered. Women continued to cherish feelings towards Antonio which were the very reverse of maternal—to such an extent that they considered it to be a dreadful misfortune to be mother or sister to him and, as such, unable to feel a thrill at the touch of his hand.

Such was his good fortune in a field which Italians, especially in the south, refer to as 'paradise', that any other young man in his position without his kindheartedness and simplicity, would have become sceptical, indifferent, even cynical. Antonio remained simple and unspoilt, even after he had finished his studies at the university, had taken his degree in law and moved to Rome. There he installed the old Sicilian furniture which his father had sent by slow boat from Catania, in a small apartment overlooking the 'Galleria Borghese. He settled down quietly and soon one, two . . . four autumns had turned the leaves in the Galleria into gold. All this time Antonio waited patiently for an appointment to the Foreign Office. Why he wished for such an appointment

it is difficult to say, and why he wanted to enter that ministry is even more of a puzzle.

At that time, in 1932, the fewer the qualifications the successful candidate to the Ministry possessed, the more he was admired and respected. 'So-and-so hasn't passed any of the examinations,' the word went round. 'He hasn't a title; he can only murder a few words of French . . . so naturally he's going to the Legation in Vienna as first secretary. The lad's got some pull somewhere; he'll get on all right.'

Lucky young men of this sort became prodigiously busy. Their heads ruled their hearts so completely that they became incapable of falling in love with a woman who was not 'influential', or of making a friend of a man who was not 'powerful'. They acquired a complete lack of sympathy for anything which savoured of weakness, modesty, misfortune or poverty.

Antonio, however, remained untouched by this kind of ruthlessness and was as lazy and honest as the Sicilian waiter of tradition—the waiter in a Sicilian café in mid-summer, too exhausted by the implacable sirocco to pretend any sort of zeal, who dissuades his customers from ordering, and if, in spite of this good advice, the customer insists on a lemon or apricot ice, is too bored and too tired to bring it.

So Antonio allowed the years to slip past him, contented in his idleness if, when he looked into a shop window, he saw the reflection of the inevitable woman who had stopped in her tracks and was making sheep's eyes at him. All seemed to be right with his world.

But in the autumn of 1934 a sudden and strange fit of depression took possession of him. By the end of November his mental gloom became abysmal.

'You're enough to spoil anyone's appetite!' his friend d'Agata said to him as they sat down to lunch together. 'What's the matter with you? Have you lost something? Has your father stopped sending you money?'

'Poor old chap!' murmured Antonio. 'He'd turn forger if he hadn't enough to send me my regular allowance.'

'Have you had bad news about your appointment?'

'A fat lot I care about my blasted appointment!'

'You haven't caught a certain disease, have you?' blurted d'Agata.

'Certainly not; I am perfectly healthy.'

'Then for God's sake stop mooning about like a mourner at your own funeral!'

'Why can't you leave me alone?'

'I won't say another word—I've got my own worries.'

And so his friends agreed not to ask him any more questions.

On the second of September, at ten in the morning, Antonio had a visit from Signorina Luisa Dreher, indisputably the belle of the Roman diplomatic world. This visit had neither been requested by him nor announced by her. Antonio had been for several walks with her, but had never dreamed of inviting her to his house. He would have considered such an invitation so unseemly that it would have been an insult to those who were helping him to get his undeserved appointment.

But here she was, this lovely girl, sitting on a stool, twisting a filmy handkerchief in her tiny hands, still brown from the summer sun.

Antonio said nothing.

The girl turned her head to the right and stared at the toe of her shoe, which she tapped nervously on the carpet.

Antonio still said nothing.

Suddenly the telephone bell rang in the next room.

Antonio ran to answer, closing the door of the sitting-room behind him. 'Hallo?'

'It's me—d'Agata. Is Luisa Dreher there?'

'How did you know?'

'So it's true, then she's there!'

'So what?'

'Listen. There was a reception at the embassy the night before last. The girls all got drunk and let their hair down!'

'What's that got to do with me?'

'Don't be an idiot!'

F  
B- 816

Antonio slammed the receiver down and went back to the sitting-room.

Luisa was brushing a tear away from the corner of her mouth with the tip of her finger.

'Why are you crying?' said Antonio.

Luisa jumped to her feet, threw her arms round his neck and pressed her flushed face against his chest. 'I love you!' she sighed. 'I love you! . . .'

Antonio stroked her hair, looking lazily through the window at the intense green light rising to the sky from the Villa Borghese.

'Don't worry; I don't expect anything,' continued Luisa. 'I don't expect you to marry me. . . . You left a letter from your father at our house; I read it.'

'What letter?'

'The letter in which your father wrote that you must go back to Catania at once to meet the girl they want you to marry!'

'You couldn't possibly read my father's writing!' stammered Antonio. 'I can never manage to myself. . . .'

‘That isn’t why I am crying. I don’t want to marry you; I’ve told you that already. I can look after myself, and I don’t want to marry anybody.’

‘Then what?’ asked Antonio.

‘I love you! I love you! For God’s sake try and understand! I love you!’

Antonio turned deathly pale and sat or rather fell down on the couch.

The girl nestled up to him so closely that he could smell the faint perfume of her angora sweater and the powder on her neck. Sobbing bitterly, she pressed her forehead against his neck—the same beautiful forehead which was crowned with a diadem of diamonds at embassy receptions. Her little hand groped under his dressing-gown for his heart, as if to discover if it were capable of beating.

Antonio’s heart started to gallop like a stallion. Beat indeed! He was off on a runaway mount, flying towards the blackest dismay.

Luisa no longer knew what she was doing. She had lost all self-control. Her hand seemed possessed of a life of its own as it nestled beneath Antonio’s dressing-gown. . . .

‘I shan’t make any demands on you!’ sobbed Luisa. ‘Don’t worry! I won’t give you any trouble! I am a sensible woman! I’m not like the others!’

‘Oh, aren’t you?’ said he, making a desperate attempt to play the role of the bold bad man. He grasped her wrists and pushed her away, far enough to be able to look her in the face. ‘You *are* like the others!’

Luisa frowned. ‘What do you mean? You don’t know what you are saying!’ Then she burst out with: ‘You’re all wrong about me. What do you think? I am still a

virgin, still a virgin !' Antonio forced an ironical smile—a considerable effort for him, as he was really a decent, sensible young man, quite capable of distinguishing a true statement from a false one. 'The most stupid, ignorant, narrow-minded, ridiculous peasant from your country,' continued Luisa more slowly and quietly, 'would have nothing to complain of if he married me. I know that the women of your island scream like chickens having their necks wrung when they go to an hotel in Taormina on their wedding night. I wouldn't scream; no, not even if you killed me. But then—I might be justified. . . . Why are you so pale? What's the matter? Are you expecting someone? Who's behind that door?'

Antonio flushed. A faint noise came from the bedroom as if made by someone leaning against the other side of the door.

'Is there a woman in there?' whispered Luisa.

'Yes.'

Luisa pulled herself together. She rose from the couch, picked up her bag from the table, took out her mirror, examined her eyes, which had turned the colour of steel, and hid all trace of tears with two dabs of her powder-puff.

'Goodbye,' she said. 'Goodbye, and forgive me.'

She went out, and Antonio rushed to the bedroom door, flung it open and got his face well licked by the poodle, who had been waiting impatiently and was overjoyed to see her master again.

Antonio picked the bitch up by her ears, shook her head gently to quiet her transports of joy. He then lay down on the couch, with the dog stretched out on him in a position, with her head between her paws, which allowed her just to reach his chin with her tongue,

but he managed to avoid being slobbered on by tilting his head.

He lay there without moving for several hours. The sky over the Villa Borghese was getting darker and darker. A crow flew in and out of the clouds, cawing at every turn.

Gently Antonio lifted the sleeping dog and put her down on the carpet. Then he brushed the hair from his clothes and finally managed to get to his feet. He glanced through the window. The fog was thicker beyond the Pincio, as if the Tiber were blotting out the sky with its steaming breath. The buildings through the trees of the villa seemed more yellow than usual. Down below, in the street, the usual plain-clothes man, dressed up to look like a young man waiting for his girl, stood stiffly at the corner of the Via Pinciana and the Via Sgambati; holding it concealed by his hat, he was reading the usual love story to alleviate the awful boredom of his interminable watch—all for a man who passed there in a car, like a flash, not more often than once in two months!

What a miserably sad place Rome is, thought Antonio. He put on his overcoat, scratched the poodle's belly and went out.

Thus ended the first part of a day that Antonio was to remember for many years.

It was the following day that Antonio went to see his uncle, Ermenegildo Fasanaro, his mother's brother, who lived in a newer part of the city.

His uncle was striding up and down his living-room, with his tie still unknotted, and his silk shirt, outside his trousers, flapping about his paunchy figure.

'You'd better go back to Catania,' said his uncle. He

was leaning against the window obscuring the view of the angle which the Tiber makes with the Villa Glori, until he moved over and blotted out the slopes of the Villa Glori itself. 'What are you doing in Rome? Trying to find out if there is any end to it? Well, I can tell you there never is any end to it. You work at it night and day and burn yourself out like a candle! You're getting hollow cheeks and you're going around half asleep like a cat that's been out on the tiles all night! . . . The devil take it! When you're dealing with women you have got to learn how to husband your strength! With a little tact you can easily string them along. I am sure that you are one of those who would give anything to make a high score every single night. . . . Isn't that so, or am I wrong?'

'But really, I . . .'

'In a way, though, you're right. Women stroke you with one hand and count with the other. But, hell's bells, it's pretty easy to see that they get their fill. You only have to know how. And you've got to know when to stop, that's all—just the opposite to what the swine who governs us says. . . . By the way, is it true that he has an ulcer of the stomach?'

'I don't know, Uncle.'

'They say he has an ulcer. Yesterday, when I was sitting in a café, I heard a naval officer, who was sitting at the next table, whispering to another officer: "We're off: it's cancer, not an ulcer!" I'm sure that they were talking about him. . . . What's your opinion?'

'I haven't any.'

'My God! You've not even any interest in politics! You don't give a fig for it! . . . I'll wager that you've not read Karl Marx?'

‘No, I haven’t!’

‘Well, don’t read him! No one who hasn’t read him before the age of thirty can possibly read him: leave him alone. When I was a young man we read him. That is, we didn’t read him either, but we talked as if we had read him. . . . Socialism! Abolition of property! . . . I suppose that you have no ideas about such subjects. Can property be abolished? I don’t believe it. On the other hand, we have become slaves of mass production—electricity, radio, telephones, railways and trams. And as we are slaves to these things, it follows that we are the slaves of the masses who produce them. Unfortunately the masses in their turn only behave themselves and work well under Fascism or Communism. Give them liberty and they’re lost; unhappy, unruly and troublesome—they just go wild. . . . Don’t you agree?’

‘Yes, Uncle!’

‘But you must remember that if a majority want Socialism the world is bound to go Socialist!’

‘Perhaps you’re right!’

‘Perhaps so, and perhaps not. It wouldn’t be the first time in history that a majority have wanted one thing and the historical process gives birth to something quite different.’

‘That is also possible.’

‘What do you mean, what also is possible?’

‘That history will give birth to something else.’

‘What else?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘There is another point. We rich—I include myself—are an odious lot.’

‘But, Uncle, you . . .’

'Take my word for it: we are odious, stupid, spoilt and bored. It is inconceivable that the world can go on until the end of time with the rich on one side and the poor on the other! I feel it in my bones, damn and blast it, that we can't possibly go on like this much longer!'

'Nobody knows!'

'But there's another side to it: there's capital. Who are we going to give the capital to? To the State? Remember that the State is really an aggregate of civil servants. From whom the good Lord deliver us! Clerks: remember that in Italy they are all robbers, too. . . . It's no use your shaking your head. They are all robbers!'

'I didn't, Uncle!'

' . . . Wherever the bureaucrats enjoy absolute power, theirs becomes a tyranny worse than that of the Roman emperors. . . . No, Socialism would mean a return to the Middle Ages!'

'You're quite right!'

'On the other hand, is a return to the Middle Ages inevitable? By whose orders? . . . Once we get an idea in our heads we delude ourselves that it is the absolute truth; like some of us thought that the March on Rome was the end of our world. Well, it wasn't. . . . No, I don't think that we'll go back to the Middle Ages again!'

'I don't believe it myself.'

'But isn't what we have today in Italy a sort of Middle Ages?'

'I don't see . . .'

'Not a doubt about it, my little treasure of a nephew! The only thing that can save us now is that cancer, and then only if it kills him in double-quick time.'

'The latest rumour is that he's got a syphilitic ulcer, not cancer.'

‘Why didn’t you tell me that before? . . . That means we’re finished! A couple of injections will clear up a syphilitic ulcer. . . . On the other hand, if he groaks who’ll take over? One of the four skunks who are closest to him? They’d cut each other’s throats to avoid having to divide up the swag. The Communists? They’re all in prison, and, besides, they would be worse than the Fascists. The trouble with the Communists is that they are honest and conscientious and they would carry out their disgusting programme efficiently, whereas the Fascists are bungling fools—their policy is equally disgusting, but they aren’t capable of carrying it out properly. . . .’

‘That’s true!’

‘On the other hand, I may be underestimating the Communists. They might be our salvation?’

‘They say that . . .’

‘They say what? Whatever it is it is sure to be nonsense! Even if Communism were a constructive and useful creed—you can take my word for it that it isn’t—I should be against it because it suppresses liberty, which is immoral.’

‘That is what I wanted to say.’

‘On the other hand, who else can take over power if he dies? The old blimps who stay at home and delude themselves that they can avoid compromising themselves because they never read either books or newspapers and do nothing but play scopa all day long? They’re too old and haven’t the slightest idea of how to govern the masses. . . .’

‘Certainly, there is no doubt about that.’

‘On the other hand, I’m all for letting the masses go to hell. If they want to put themselves in the hands of a hangman that’s their affair, but I haven’t the slightest intention of doing so myself! And I intend to count for something, by God, at least in my own estimation. . . .’

But perhaps everything I've said is all nonsense. It must be when you remember 1922; you don't remember as far back as that, but in that year the workers were quietly flocking back to work and strikes were becoming fewer and fewer, when along comes the swine and bang goes liberty, for us as well as the workers. No, Antonio, in that respect you mustn't think that the Italian workers are any different from the Italian bourgeoisie—they are both equally in love with liberty. It's only the swine who wants us to believe that they aren't! Tell your mother to pray for his death instead of praying that you won't get chilblains! I hope that he'll die soon—at any rate before I do—of boredom and annoyance at his stupid antics! Have you heard the latest? It's almost inconceivable. Lorenzo Calderara is going to be appointed Federal Secretary of Catania. Do you think that can possibly be true?

'I believe it is.'

'Calderara, son of "pock-face", grandson of old "branguts", and brother of a donkey? God in heaven! A city famous for men like De Felice, Macchi, Verga, Bellini, Angelo Musco, Giovanni Grasso, Capuana and my friend De Roberto to sink so low, to be put in the power of that little twirp Lorenzino Calderara, appropriately nicknamed Cabbage-stump, a jesuit, too, a man whose guts are so windy that everyone avoids him, a brainless nitwit—so stupid and credulous that he believed his friends who told him the tale that you could buy letters made of iron at any chemist's!'

'What kind of letters?' •

'Come, come, Antonio, don't be dense! . . . Let it pass. But in any case what would he do with them? A miserable impotent devil that . . .'

Antonio turned as white as a sheet. He seemed to

cringe in his chair; even his expression was horribly like that of a beaten dog.

'What's the matter?' asked his uncle. 'What's come over you?'

Antonio bent his head forward, closed his eyes, squeezed them more tightly shut with one hand, and with the other hand motioned to his uncle to make him understand that there was nothing to be worried about and that he would soon be all right.

'You, my son,' continued that worthy gentleman when Antonio raised his head again, 'should make a bee line for Catania! If you stay here the women will gobble you up alive, clothes and all. . . . They don't give any trouble to an old man like me: but it's a very different matter for a young man like you, especially someone with your . . . yes, we'll call it charm. . . . Your face, round and smooth; they all want to treat it like a piece of chocolate. . . . Now let's talk about something that really matters! I met Barbara Puglisi, the girl they want you to marry. I heard her play the violin at an evening party given by His Reverence her uncle to celebrate the silver anniversary of his wedding to the church. I can't say that she played superlatively well . . . but what's that to you? She's rich. She owns half Paternò. She went to a good boarding-school. . . . Of course, that doesn't make her an intellectual genius. . . . But in my opinion, for what it's worth, women shouldn't be allowed to be too intelligent. They shouldn't be stupid, either. But even if she were stupid I don't see that that would worry you, would it? That's life! Cheer up, my boy!'

Three days later Antonio left for Catania. At his heels trotted a large, skinny, mournful-looking dog, who undeterred by innumerable bumps from trunks and bags or

digs from old ladies' umbrellas, unswervingly followed the white poodle bitch with whom he had fallen in love at first sight in the waiting-room. Antonio pulled the sleek and immaculately groomed poodle along by its leash, as fast as he could, but she kept on pulling back and turning round to encourage her uncouth but faithful admirer.

Luigi d'Agata was waiting on the platform. He embraced Antonio with tears in his eyes. 'It really is tragic that you should be leaving just when things are beginning to look up! I must tell you about it. I was at the general's house yesterday and they invented a new game, an incredible game. If you told them about it in Catania they wouldn't believe it even if you dropped dead to prove it! They call it the Truth game. You can ask any question you like and the answer is supposed to be absolutely truthful. They asked Signora Pollini: "If a band of thugs broke into this room and ordered you, at the point of a pistol, to go to bed with one of your fellow guests, whom would you choose?"'

'And what did she say?' asked Antonio, who had climbed up into the carriage with his poodle and was leaning out of the window.

'The signora,' continued d'Agata from the platform, 'went as red as a beet—heaven only knows whom she really would have chosen if she had followed her natural impulses—but she did not want to shock anybody or give herself away, so she whispered demurely with that eminently kissable little mouth of hers: "The general, of course!" Yes, you tell that to Tofalo! That she wanted to go to bed with the general, she did! . . . Then they asked me: "Which of the ladies present would you like to go to bed with?"'

‘What did you say?’ asked Antonio, picking the poodle up in his arms so that she could say goodbye to the dog who was standing forlornly on the platform.

‘I . . .’ answered d’Agata, as the train started to move off; he ran along under the window, with the faithful dog loping awkwardly by his side. ‘I answered: “With Signora Bertini and Signora Gallarati——”’

‘With both of them together?’ asked Antonio.

‘Yes, both together!’ shouted d’Agata, waving his handkerchief, laughing uproariously and winking at great speed, in the hope that at least one of these signals of mirth would be caught by his friend, who was being carried away towards the south—a part of the world which he feared would hold a minimum of adventure in store for Antonio.

## CHAPTER TWO

‘. . . The embarrassed author adds one word only, that the anecdotes, by means of which he has attempted to portray morals and customs, are entirely his own invention.’

STENDHAL

‘It might be said that I was betraying a secret, in emphasising the comic side of their activities. It might be claimed that they had demanded a promise of silence from me, before showing themselves to me as they really were. Actually this was not the case. They had thoroughly enjoyed giving themselves away, just as much as I enjoyed watching them and writing down my observations. . . .’

CONSTANT

‘Perhaps the most debasing effect of servitude is to rivet its victims to itself by a sort of amorous attachment.’

VAUVENARGUES

ANTONIO'S PARENTS LIVED on the third and top floor of one of the oldest buildings in the centre of Catania. Each flat had a balcony looking down on to the courtyard which was crossed by a network of ropes running from the porter's lodge to bells—one on the railing of each balcony, ten in all.

His parents' flat also had a little terrace, which was boxed in between the dining-room and the wall of the next house, a much higher one, which until recently had been a blind wall. But now there was a balcony which was almost constantly occupied by a pompous old fellow, Lawyer Ardizzone—a man with a ready flow of flowery rhetoric, a passion for petty intrigue and a

menacing forefinger thrust out rapidly and rhythmically towards his victims. He loved strutting about the court in his flowing legal robes. At home he wore an equally flowing, flowered, silk dressing-gown. He had attempted to immortalise himself by a portrait in oils. This painting took up half one of the walls of the lawyers' club-house and showed him with the famous menacing forefinger—pointed upwards, out of consideration for such a distinguished audience—and with his left hand resting on a lictor's bundle of many colours. However, in spite of these conspicuous features and qualities, in spite of innumerable cases of oranges despatched to the most influential men in Rome, and in spite of a most voluminous correspondence with under-secretaries—impassioned letters, now imploring and mellifluous, now wrathfully clamorous with a sense of righteous grievance—he had failed to secure the coveted senatorship. This fact preyed on his mind to such an extent that he talked about it in his sleep: 'What's the use of having influential friends in Rome? Heaven knows how many common policemen are now sitting pretty in the Palazzo Madama as quaestors, entirely thanks to my efforts on their behalf. But my precious influential friends won't raise a finger to help *me*. They leave me to rot here like an old broom. . . . Long live Giolitti!' He would then add: 'Such things couldn't happen when he was in power.' A foolhardy thing to say when every house had its quota of 'informers'. If a neighbour eavesdropped and denounced him it would have meant arrest and a long prison sentence.

On the other side, the terrace overlooked the main street of Catania, the Via Etnea, which was noisy with the clatter of ancient trams, the sound of whips laid on

the backs of skinny horses, incessant talking and shouting, laughter, and the cries of newsvendors. Movement was as incessant as noise—shoulder clapping, handshaking, gesticulations, collisions, bowing and scraping. Another side of the terrace overlooked a short side street which led straight up to the façade of a church. The blue-cloaked figure of a Madonna looked out of a niche at the top of this façade, whose fingers were joined by ten shining spokes, encrusted with tiny electric-light bulbs, which, at night, made ten golden stabs into the sirocco haze.

When he was a boy Antonio had been accustomed, on hot August nights, to fall asleep on this terrace, with his head on his mother's lap. He remembered listening to the gentle susurrations of her fan and to the sound of his father alternately spitting and noisily gulping from the water-jug. His father had the habit of smoking the butts of strong black cigars in his pipe and also of smacking his lips after drinking. 'Ah,' he would say, 'God help me, there's nothing in the world half as good as fresh cold water!'

His father and mother were waiting to greet him on this same terrace, when he returned from Rome. Here he was embraced and kissed. Biscuits, coffee, and an egg and milk were brought out to him. With tears in his eyes he told them about his white poodle, who had escaped from the train when it had stopped at a station and had not returned. In exchange, his mother gave him the news of his home town.

'Dipaola's son died of pneumonia,' she began. 'Your poor old Aunt Santina has a pulse rate of thirty, but the doctor says she'll live to be a hundred. Be careful you don't mention the subject of wearing horns to Palermo

the lawyer! You're just like your father, and I'm sure you would if I hadn't warned you!

'Why, particularly?'

'His wife ran away with one of his young clerks last Sunday. . . . And if you meet young Baron Benedettini you'll have to cut him dead; they found a card up his sleeve at the gambling club! . . . Zuccarello's son died suddenly, in two days; he didn't even have time to make the sign of the cross. Professor Calarà hasn't eaten anything for a week. God preserve us, the poor old dear thinks that every morsel of food turns into dung in his mouth; he'll soon be dead at that rate. . . .'

'The devil take you!' interrupted his father. 'Can't you talk about something more cheerful? Come along with me, Antonio.' Signor Alfio took Antonio into his study. He made for his couch, the old-fashioned kind with a shelf running along the back, crammed with all kinds of bric-à-brac. He sank into it so heavily that these objects teetered and nearly fell on his head. He said with a deep sigh: 'I think I've got angina pectoris!'

'Good lord!' exclaimed Antonio; and then with unexpected irony: 'Is that the way to start a cheerful conversation?'

'I know it isn't cheerful, but I feel it my duty to tell you.'

'You've forgotten how many times you've thought that you had angina and every time the doctor found you as strong as a horse!'

'You may be right. Perhaps it isn't angina, but I've certainly got something!' complained the old man. 'In any case, I *have* got diabetes; nobody can deny that! Your—what the devil is he?—I mean your uncle, he spotted it the night we were having dinner with him

and I drank so much water—I remember what he said: ‘My friend, that’s your sixth glass! You go and have your blood analysed; do it tomorrow and don’t waste any time about it. . . .’ I had the analysis done the next day and they found more sugar than in a piece of crystallised fruit. . . . You needn’t look so alarmed! I’m not done for yet and I might add that if your mother didn’t make such a song and dance about it and carry on as if I were an invalid . . . My goodness, I’m still quite capable . . . well, you know what I mean; I can still perform a man’s chief function as competently as ever. You needn’t feel ashamed of your father, I assure you, even if he’s not as young as he was.’

Antonio flushed to the roots of his hair.

‘What are you blushing like a girl for?’ continued Signor Alfio. ‘I’ve never been mealy-mouthed in our talks together in the past. I’m sure you’d hate to have a weakling for a father; it would upset you as much as it upset me the day I found out that your grandfather paid good money just to have a look at a certain female in the nude and then all he did was to blow his nose, make a polite bow and go off in exactly the same state as he arrived. . . . It’s true that he was nearly eighty at the time. . . .’ He paused for a moment. ‘Damn it, I do go rambling on! That’s the worst of getting old! I can never remember what I started to say. . . . Oh, I know! I told you all that because I am convinced that you ought to get married!’

‘But, Papa . . .’

‘That’s enough from you! If you don’t marry—what the devil is her name?—Barbara Puglisi, you’re your own worst enemy!’

‘But I’ve never even seen her.’

'You've never seen her because whenever you see a girl you like you turn your back on her, as if she'd called you a son of I don't know what. . . . You're an idiot! I'm not so blind as you think I am! You're ashamed of liking girls with nice big breasts and heavy ankles. But why be ashamed of it, stupid boy? If you want to know, your grandfather liked them that way, and so did I, and—I shouldn't admit it to you—I still do. What's her name? Yes, Barbara Puglisi is a lass after our own hearts. Besides, she's rich, she loves you and she's a thoroughly nice girl. . . . What the devil more can you want?'

'I'd rather wait a few years.'

'My friend, you're almost thirty. Soon you'll be too old for it. . . . I don't really mean that, because we come of first-class stock and can go on doing it until we die, but marriage at forty is a very different thing from marriage at thirty. Besides, I am afraid that I can no longer afford to keep you in Rome.'

'Why? Have you gone broke all of a sudden?'

'In ten years our orange groves will be worth over a million. But at the present moment things are so bad that your mother sometimes has to borrow a little ready cash from the porter. I sold everything I had to buy that land and had to borrow from the bank as well; but I've already planted ten thousand little orange trees. . . . That means a fortune, in the future! . . . But, in the meanwhile, I have to put that much into it'—he made a large gesture—'and get this much out of it'—he made a gesture signifying extreme smallness. 'But what do I care? I'd sell my shirt for them!'

'What do you mean by them?' said Antonio, somewhat irritably.

'My orange trees. . . . If you'd only seen them, Antonio! How beautiful they are! They're even more beautiful than you are. Don't you believe me? But that's just my way of talking. . . . What they're really doing is sucking away my life blood! I can't think what made me take on this extra burden? . . . What am I saying? Blessed be the day on which I conceived the idea of buying! Blessed be the notary who signed the act of sale! . . . Here I go rambling on again!' He clapped his hand to his head and groaned: 'You were in Rome for five years and in all that time you never managed to pull off a single thing; but you did manage to spend a hundred thousand lire. It breaks my heart to think of it!'

'It wasn't my fault,' muttered Antonio. 'Lots of young men manage to get into the diplomatic service without passing any exams. But, in my case, everybody filled me up with promises. When I went back to jog their memories they looked at me as if they had never seen me before!'

'But that fellow—what's his name?—the Minister, the count with the flashy riding-boots, wouldn't he condescend to do something for you?'

'The Minister, . . . don't mention him; he behaved the worst of the lot.'

'No wonder!' shouted his father, violently whacking his leg with his pipe. 'If you got off with his wife! . . .'

'But that isn't true,' said Antonio in a querulous voice.

'Am I asking *you* whether it's true? But I'll tell you something. So help me God, that count has been cuckolded so often and so obviously that any other man would have tumbled to it years ago. But not he; the fool had to wait for my coxcomb of a son to come all the way from Catania to make him throw a fit of jealousy!'

‘He was not jealous!’ shouted Antonio, and this time his face was red with anger. ‘Anyhow, I never slept with his confounded wife! It’s all a lie! You just can’t understand!’

His father gave him a baleful glare.

‘Let it pass,’ he said. ‘That’s your affair and not mine. But there’s something else I’d like you to explain to me. How is it possible for a miserable weakling, an ass that I would disown if he were my own son, to become Federal Secretary of Catania while you can’t even get one of your slinky Roman women to wangle a desk and chair for you at the Foreign Ministry?’

At this point a sepulchral voice reached them from the terrace:

‘My dear Signor Alfio, I have been informed that your son has arrived from the capital. . . .’ It was Lawyer Ardizzone, gesticulating in his usual agitated manner from his balcony.

‘We’d better go back to the terrace,’ said Signor Alfio, and then added hurriedly: ‘That lawyer fellow thinks that you’re the countess’s lover. If he asks you about it don’t commit yourself, don’t say yes or no. In any case, don’t talk to him the way you’ve been talking to me; he’d end up by believing that sort of a denial!’

Back on the terrace, they found Antonio’s mother beating up another egg for him. The lawyer, draped in his dressing-gown, was leaning from his balcony. His daughter Elena was beside him. She was an old maid of some thirty-six summers. The Catania wags claimed that she had made it excessively clear to everybody that she had ‘taken the fatal step’ during a recent holiday in Switzerland.

‘What news from the capital of the world?’ pontificated the lawyer. ‘What transpires in that foul sewer, that sink of abomination, which the Duce would be well advised to destroy root and branch? We Sicilians are still looked down upon there, of course? All because we are clever enough to be able to sell our goods to them and also to others who are infinitely superior to them! . . .’

His speech was interrupted by Elena, who bumbled coyly: ‘Signora Rosària, have you noticed what marvellous long eyelashes your son has? How does he manage to grow them so long? . . . They’re real fans, not eyelashes! Don’t you agree, Papa, that they look like the feathers of a fan?’

‘That one’s got the itch again,’ muttered Signor Alfio and walked off abruptly, without saying a word to anyone.

But the unfortunate Antonio had to wait till the lawyer’s red face turned pale—an infallible sign that the flood of his eloquence had run dry, at least for the moment. Antonio then had to submit to having his forehead and eyelids kissed by his mother, who was egged on by the giggling exhortations of the over-ripe spinster from the balcony.

‘Kiss him there! Lower down! Is he ticklish? Further up! Good gracious, what a beard! It must scrape like sandpaper!’

At long last Antonio was left alone and could gaze, at his leisure, at the beloved roofs of Catania, those dark roofs, dotted with wine jars, drying figs and laundry. His eyes also wandered over the many cupolas, which glitter at night like golden mitres and the deserted seats of the open-air theatres; the pepper trees in the park; the

Sicilian sky, low and intimate as the ceiling of a room, across which the clouds float in a familiar age-old pattern; then Etna crouching between the sea and the mainland of the island, with its dozens of black villages just managing to cling to its paws, tail and back. He then went inside to his own room. After five years the familiar smell greeted him as affectionately as a faithful dog who had been waiting to jump up at him and lick his nose. Here, in the two bookcases, stood the heavy tomes which had first opened his mind to the 'marvels of learning, until his reading had been interrupted, suddenly at adolescence, by a phase of romantic dreaming. Here were the walls covered by paintings, prints, hangings, crucifixes and bowls of holy water. Here, in the middle of the room, stood the wash-basin with its mirror on a swivel—you had to be careful not to push it too far back, or the bottom edge knocked over the bottles and jars lined up in front of it. Here were the quilted jacket, the hot-water bottle, the foot-warmer, the warming-pan. . . . Antonio lay down on his bed and went to sleep. Two hours later he woke, his cheeks bathed in tears. What had he been dreaming about? He could not remember, though he desperately wanted to do, so to dispel his sadness.

'I swear,' he said to himself, 'before my crucifix, that I won't ever again give way to melancholy like this!'

That evening, to shake off the last vestiges of his grey mood, he accepted a queer invitation from his friend and cousin, Edoardo Lentini. It was to attend the inauguration of Lorenzo Calderara, as Federal Secretary. The Vice-Secretary-General of the party himself had graciously consented to come from Rome for the cere-

mony, a man whose chest was completely covered with medals and who was inordinately addicted to chasing the women of the town. As soon as they were told about this amiable idiosyncrasy of his, several of his admirers had put their heads together; it was essential that one who possessed such absolute power, for good and evil, should be provided with an unforgettable night's entertainment. As a result of their efforts the so-called Pensione Eros closed its doors at eleven sharp. Its regular customers, who were shut out, expressed their indignation in the loudest and most unmistakable manner, even to the extent of stone-throwing and hammering at the door. Such was their fury that the special police who had been posted there for the purpose, disguised as young conscripts somewhat the worse for drink, could not dislodge them from the garden. This ungodly din went on for half an hour. At the end of that time the policemen, tired of pretending to be drunk and of being the butt of the mob of disgruntled young men, stopped pretending and pulled out their revolvers and shouted: 'Off with you at once or we'll shoot without further warning!'

Meanwhile several 400-watt bulbs blazed in the dining-room of the Pensione Eros. Glasses, plates and egg-cups sparkled behind the glass doors of the buffets, Coats, cloaks, fezes and official berets were piled untidily on the marble table-tops.

Antonio was introduced to the Vice-Secretary as a friend of Countess K.

'Is what they say about you true, Comrade?' asked the great man.

'What do they say?' murmured Antonio, blushing, while Lorenzo Calderara whispered in his ear: 'Be very

careful what you answer ! Above all, be respectful to him ! . . . Why aren't you wearing the party-badge ?'

'They say,' continued the august official, 'that you are irresistible to women. What about you?' he added, turning to the four girls who stood by his side and who were making a liberal display of their rounded charms through the thinnest of veils. 'What's your opinion? Do you find him so attractive?'

The four women gave Antonio a fleeting glance—long enough for two of them, the best and the worst-looking, to take a violent fancy to him.

'Well, what's your verdict? What do you think of him?' Then, with the unceremonious rudeness of his kind, he seized Antonio's hands and pulled back his sleeves high enough to show his white and delicate wrists. 'Or do you prefer my type?' And he pulled up his own sleeves to display his own two bulging and hairy wrists.

The women, afraid of displeasing him, expressed their unbridled admiration for him. One of them perched herself on his knee, pushed the medals aside, opened his shirt and slid her fingers under his vest. She pulled out a tuft of hair and twisted it into the shape of a tail. All the women had a gentle pull at this tail, and all the men, with the exception of Antonio, made it the object of jokes which were the most brazen form of flattery.

'At any rate, no one could mistake you for a woman !' purred Lorenzo Calderara in his unctuous voice.

Shortly afterwards bottles of brandy and gin were served on an enormous tray. Eyes began to glitter drunkenly through the cigarette smoke. The Vice-Secretary went off twice with the same girl; then he wanted to go

upstairs with the proprietress, but she politely and firmly refused.

'We'll have to lock you up, Nedda!' said Calderara. It was difficult to tell from his tone of voice whether he was joking or serious.

'Go ahead and send me to prison,' answered the proprietress, pretending that she was taking the whole thing as a great joke.

When he went upstairs for a third time, the Vice-Secretary had to be satisfied with one of the other girls, who frowned sulkily at the idea of having to play second fiddle to the old proprietress.

When the Vice-Secretary came down again, with his jacket unfastened and his arm round the girl's naked waist he was greeted with loud applause.

'I don't want to be indiscreet,' said Lawyer Lentini, 'but I would like to know how old you are?'

'Ah, my dear friend,' answered the great man, 'I am getting on! . . . Guess!'

'Twenty-five! . . . Twenty-four!' shouted those who wanted to flatter him.

'Forty! . . . Forty-two!' shouted the others who were equally anxious to flatter him, but wanted him to know that they realised the eminence of his position and that he had taken an exceptionally short time over his brilliant career.

'Thirty-two!' he said, shortly.

'Good heavens!' exclaimed the first lot. 'You are such a fellow with the women that we couldn't believe that you are older than twenty-five!'

'By Bacchus!' cried the second lot. 'Only thirty-two, and already Vice-Secretary of the party?'

They then fell to talking about all the young men

who were indisputably at 'the helm of the State', under the new government. All the ministers, mayors and federal secretaries were young men, and the youngest of them all was . . . here they lowered their voices, made a valiant attempt to wipe the expression of drunken hilarity from their faces and straightened up in their chairs. Whenever the name of the greatest man in Italy was pronounced all sprang instinctively and stiffly to 'attention'.

But they were incapable of keeping up this pretence at sobriety for long. A young inspector picked up one of the girls and dropped her on Lorenzo Calderara's lap; a great joke, as the gossips of the town had spread the malicious rumour that he had never slept with a whore in his life.

Everybody shouted and clapped; the girl whispered seductively into Calderara's ear; he turned red as a turkey cock and gave a ghastly smile.

'Come on!' shouted the Vice-Secretary, egged on by a few words from a thin sycophantic individual, who bent obsequiously over him. 'Come on, Lorenzo, don't let us down! The Federal Secretary of Catania can't be a ninny! Our party is a virile party! . . . You know what that means, eh? And you, Comrade Elena, are to report directly to me as soon as it's over!'

Everybody, except Antonio, set on Calderara to pull him to his feet and push him out of the room with the girl.

'Don't push!' cried Calderara. 'Enough, I say! I am quite capable of walking upstairs without your help. . . . That's enough!'

The others were a bit nervous of having overstepped the mark with a man who, from tomorrow onwards,

would be left in sole command over them. They turned to the Vice-Secretary-General for help.

'Leave him alone!' said the latter. 'He's going under his own steam.'

'No he's not!' shouted the proprietress at this point.

This unexpected outburst dumbfounded everybody.

'You heard me! I tell you that he is certainly not going! . . . May the Virgin Mary come to my rescue! Must I be guilty of blasphemy, for your sakes? . . . I say that he's not going! . . .'

'What do you mean, he's not going?' said the Vice-Secretary. 'By whose orders?'

'Mine,' said the woman, clutching her enormous bosom.

The Vice-Secretary lifted his bulk from the chair. His nostrils were pinched and pale with rage. He strode up to the proprietress, lifted her chin, stared coldly straight into her eyes and slapped her across the face, with lightning speed and with such force that she was sent reeling back against the wall.

The woman raised her hands to steady herself and clutched at the tapestry on the wall; this came loose and fell around her. She then slipped to the floor, and the girls ran up to her. They pulled the tapestry off her and forced a little water between her chattering teeth.

The drink seemed to clear her head. She then rubbed her eyes hard with the back of her hand and stared at the men, one after another, who had now resumed their seats.

'Do you feel better?' asked Lorenzo Calderara ironically.

'I did it for your sake, you fool!' stammered the woman, still sitting on the ground.

Calderara rose from his chair and walked towards the woman with his hand lifted in a threatening manner—an exact, though laughable, imitation of the Vice-Secretary's recent gesture.

'That's enough—now!' cried one of the girls, the tallest and best-looking one. 'It's time to finish this stupid game!' She gave Calderara a violent push with one hand and sent him staggering backwards. 'Blessed Virgin, what a night! Who brought these people here? . . . Come, let's get out of here!' and turned to Antonio. 'Let's go, darling. . . . God, how I need a breath of fresh air!'

The others sat as if stunned by these words. They began to realise that they had been guilty of conduct which was grossly ungentlemanly, to say the least of it.

The girl stood, with her arm round Antonio, staring at the others in a cold and haughty manner, unconsciously betraying, the while, the warmth of her feelings for Antonio by the movements of her naked body and the equally unconscious, enveloping motion of her right hand.

'I can tell you that it has been a rotten evening for us, too. Come on, let's go!' said the Vice-Secretary-General as he rose. Edoardo Lentini was worried about his friend; he was afraid that the others would take offence at his being preferred so openly.

'But Antonio will come with us. He certainly won't want to stay here and waste his time!' he remarked quietly.

'His time won't be wasted here,' answered the girl. 'He'll waste it if he goes with you. All you think of is playing imbecile practical jokes on perfectly harmless people!'

'Come on, Antonio; you can't stop here!' repeated Edoardo, this time in a louder and firmer voice.

'Leave him alone!' ordered the Vice-Secretary-General, carefully sliding his fez over his well-oiled hair. 'We're neither tyrants nor bullies. It is not for us to tell a whore whom she is to choose as her fancy-boy!'

This was too much for Antonio. He shook himself free from the girl and lifted the fez off the great man's head; he did so without haste or any sign of excitement, but with a sort of indolent assurance. Then he slowly tossed it up and down like a ball and looked at the open window as if he intended to throw it out into the street.

The whole company was aghast. Lorenzo Calderara seemed to swell up like a bull-frog, gasping for breath. Edoardo Lentini seemed to be muttering prayers for his friend in such dire peril. The women, on the other hand, seemed more fascinated by him than ever; his courage made him doubly desirable—in the primitive literal sense.

The Vice-Secretary put out his podgy hand and laid it on Antonio's. He deliberately looked all round the room; then stared at Antonio. He, too, seemed to fall under Antonio's spell and suddenly burst into a peal of laughter.

Everyone heaved a sigh of relief—all except Lorenzo Calderara, whose reaction time was exceedingly slow and who found it impossible to pass easily from anger to amusement.

'Happy hunting, young man!' said His Eminence, putting on his fez again and flicking Antonio's chest lightly with his whip. 'Would you like the job of Vice-Federal Secretary at Bologna? I'll gladly send you there! . . . The women will wear you out and you'll die of galloping consumption. But if you don't you'll be full Federal Secretary within a year! . . . Think about it

tonight, if your girl gives you time to think. . . . Come on, comrades !'

He hooked his cloak up at the neck and stamped noisily out of the room.

In strict order of party seniority the others trooped after him, chattering and laughing.

## CHAPTER THREE

'... When I see thee pass queenly and apart, thy lovely hair unbound, thy stately person breathing pride, madness fills my blood.'

V. CARDARELLI

'Often I watched you walking to the temple, clad in the chaste splendour of your holiday clothes, and your good mother pacing soberly at your side.'

GOETHE

ANTONIO WAS NOT allowed to forget his evening at the Eros. The very next day Signor Alfio was told all the juicy details in a gloomy passage of the fusty old court-house.

'A nice business!' he said, as they sat down to dinner, turning to his wife and pretending to ignore Antonio. 'Your son comes back home with the prospect of making a splendid marriage and goes and spends his very first night in a brothel!'

'He's still a bachelor,' retorted his mother, glad of the chance of airing her resentment against her husband, whose marriage vows had never deterred him from indulging in similarly unsavoury habits. 'What's to stop him?'

'All you can do is to nag at me! But do you realise that if Father Rosario, Barbara's uncle, hears of it the marriage will be called off?' •

The following day this same priest called on Signor Alfio. When the visitor's name was announced his first instinct was to run away and hide; he dithered and hastily gulped three glasses of water.

'I have come to congratulate you. Your son's good fortune is already known to me,' said Father Rosario, sitting down opposite old Magnano. •

'What good fortune?' asked the latter suspiciously.

'It has been reported to me that your son is in the good graces of the Vice-Secretary-General of the party. . . .'

'I don't know anything about it,' answered Signor Alfio, still afraid that the priest was setting a trap for him. 'I wasn't even aware of the fact that they knew each other.'

'It appears that they met the other evening. . . .'

'Don't let's waste time,' snorted Signor Alfio angrily, reacting as if the priest had already accused him of something shameful. 'Don't beat about the bush! Tell me frankly what you have come to say!'

'Well then, I will be quite frank with you. I would be very grateful to Antonio if he would ask the Vice-Secretary-General to do something about the Viagrande Trades Union organisation. It's a real scandal. They stop at nothing. They have caused me endless trouble. They even had the audacity, last October, to send me all the robbers in the province to work in my vineyards and harvest my grapes. They stole everything they could lay their hands on . . . everything, even my night-cap!'

'Oh, is that all?' exclaimed Signor Alfio, breathing a sigh of relief.

'Why, what else did you expect?'

'Nothing, nothing!' cried old Magnano. 'I thought . . . well, nothing at all!'

Signor Alfio reported this conversation to Antonio. The account was interspersed, alternately, with smothered laughter and angry rumblings; so much so that Antonio could not understand the half of it. In any case, he

was not listening carefully. He was wool-gathering and only paid attention when his father raised his voice.

‘But you, you’ve got some queer idea in your head that I don’t like at all. It’s been there for some time. What is it?’ he asked.

‘Nothing,’ answered Antonio, getting up and walking to the door.

‘The devil take me and fry me!’ growled the old man, watching his son push the door open and walk out in a tired and languid manner.

That evening Antonio and Edoardo Lentini strolled up and down the Via Crociferi. They were surrounded by deserted and silent churches and convents. Steep steps led up to the churchyards, but were shut off by tall iron gates, securely fastened by chains.

The air was scented and infinitely still. Their hearts ached with longing for romance. They felt the usual urge to sentimentalise over the past. They imagined impossibly romantic young men flitting along the same road to meet impossibly beautiful women a hundred years ago. These ideas made them even more restless and intensified their melancholy mood.

‘It’s disgusting to have to be respectful to a man like the Vice-Secretary-General!’ said Edoardo. ‘In the old days we’d have cut him dead. What a bore! I’d have given anything to kick him in the pants!’

‘He’s certainly a tough customer,’ mused Antonio. ‘He had three women in less than an hour!’

‘I’d have done the same myself if I hadn’t noticed something that a swinish fellow like him would never notice in a thousand years: those women despised us!’

‘Do you really think so?’

'The old proprietress told us off, good and proper. I could have kissed her feet for it, the old dear.'

'I'm afraid you're all wrong about the old girl. I'm sorry to have to shatter your illusions, my friend. The real fact is that she was beside herself with rage because our party prevented her seeing an old customer who was to bring her a supply of some drug or other that night. Besides, after you left, she swore to me, with tears in her eyes, that she would give ten years of her life to spend a single night with Mussolini.'

'That's the last straw! There's nothing but decadence left; decadence, dullness and sadness!' Edoardo then proceeded to tell Antonio a story from the *Annals of Tacitus*, which he had learnt by heart that morning: a long story about Nero who ordered a prostitute to be tortured in order to prove that no woman can stand up to pain. The end and the moral of the story was that the whore saved the lives of a number of people she did not even know by standing up to the most agonising torture, whereas the men, even knights and senators, denounced their nearest relatives at the very threat of torture. In conclusion, Edoardo said to Antonio: 'In Italy today we can't even count on the women. . . . A society which cannot even count on its whores is utterly damned and finished! There's nothing more to hope for! But, as far as I'm concerned, I've reconciled myself to it. In fact I want to ask you a favour.'

'What favour? Tell me!'

'As the Vice-Secretary-General has taken a fancy to you, ask him to appoint me Mayor of Catania.'

'What do you mean? . . . I don't understand.'

'Antonio, my dear friend, I'm thirty-two years old and it is time I earned my living. I'm tired of staying at home

and earning nothing except black looks from my father-in-law. Fascism will last for more than a hundred years; but even if it is overthrown I don't propose to apologise for my actions to anybody. If I were concerned with justifying myself to the next lot that take over I should be a fool. Why attach disproportionate importance to appearances? Appearances are superficial phenomena of no basic importance. Basically it does not matter a fig whether we join the party or refuse to wear the party badge, whether we take office or sulk at home. What does matter is that we are certain to be condemned to a life of the blackest unhappiness whichever of the two courses we choose. On the other hand, if I get the job of mayor I'll do a good job; I won't accept bribes and I will treat everybody equally fairly and decently, and some day I might be able to use my inside knowledge of the party to stab it in the back far more efficiently than if I had stayed at home.'

If Antonio had been listening, if his intelligence had not been fogged for some time past, he would undoubtedly have considered his friend's speech both strange and incoherent. As it was, he merely replied that nothing would induce him to speak to the Vice-Secretary-General again.

The subject was dropped and the two friends continued their walk. Neither of them noticed the thin white face of a nun staring at Antonio from behind the grating of a convent window with an expression compounded of hostility and fascination; it seemed to say: 'I hate you, but I can't tear my eyes away from you!'

'I know!' exclaimed Antonio suddenly. 'I ought to go back to my reading! I've just realised that I haven't read a single book right through for more than ten years. I

feel as if I were drugged with ignorance! Books wake one up! . . . I wonder if it is true that Lorenzo Calderara has never slept with a whore? Some say that he hasn't slept with a woman at all. What do you think? In any case . . .'

'In any case,' continued Edoardo, 'you can't expect everyone to be like you!' He winked and wrinkled his forehead in a comic frown.

The mere thought of women was enough to change their mood. Edoardo gave a great shout which extinguished the white gleam of the face behind the grating, just as if he had blown out a candle.

'Hurrah!' he shouted at the deserted street. 'Other countries may have liberty, but Italy still has her women!'

Three days later, hearing that the Vice-Secretary-General had left for Rome, Antonio paid a visit to Lorenzo Calderara at the headquarters of the Federation of Fascists. The usher had been called away to answer the telephone. Antonio had been cooling his heels for an hour in the waiting-room. Finally he lost patience and pushed open the Federal Secretary's door. He saw Calderara lying on his back on the couch, head down, face suffused with blood, the veins of his forehead as prominent as ropes. . . . Antonio was not exactly shocked, but he had no wish to see any more; he pulled the door to and made off as quietly as possible.

Shortly afterwards Salinitro, the pharmacist, gave him a message from his old school-fellow, Angelo Bartolini, who lived alone on the outskirts of the city: 'Tell Antonio that I shall be just as pleased if I don't see him for at least ten years.'

'Why doesn't he want to see me for ten years?' asked

Antonio, standing with the pharmacist on the sidewalk of Via Etnea. 'I've always liked him.'

'Because he heard that you were to be appointed Federal Secretary of some city or other.'

'That's a lie!' answered Antonio. 'Tell him that for four years I haven't even paid my party dues and that one of these days I'm going to shut myself up in my house in the country and . . .'

At that moment he caught sight of Barbara Puglisi and her mother, coming out of a side street and walking towards them. The girl carried a missal in her hand and was leaning forward as she walked as though she was obliged to restrain and conceal the exuberant vitality of her youth. A nudge from her mother's elbow warned Barbara to pay attention to where she was going. She straightened up and her oval face, shadowed by a purple veil, turned slightly to the left; her dark pupils contracted when she saw Antonio, showing up the dazzling white of her eyeballs. She was so impressed by what she saw that it altered the rhythm of her footsteps, carrying her away from her mother and close up to the young man. He could smell the fragrance of her veil, of her skin warmed by a sudden rush of blood, of her tortoise-shell combs and her clothes, which had lain for so long in contact with dried flowers that they had become impregnated with their perfume. None of his women in Rome had smelt remotely like this. These delightful odours penetrated him as if they had been shot into his body by arrows from Cupid's bow; he was profoundly moved to the roots of his physical being.

'God!' he murmured. 'God! That must be . . .'

'I don't understand,' said the pharmacist.

Antonio's only answer was to throw his arms around his neck and hug the man closely to him.

'I understand still less,' added the bewildered pill-driver.

'Tell my friend Angelo,' exclaimed Antonio ecstatically, 'that in a few days I am going to marry the girl you just saw go by . . . and that I am the happiest of mortals!'

As he finished speaking he gazed devoutly up at the statue of the Madonna in front of the Church of Carmine, as if to thank her for his good fortune.

'And what shall I tell him about your political convictions?' asked the other.

'Oh, those . . . what do they matter?' cried Antonio, giving the pharmacist's hand an affectionate squeeze.

The same evening he walked into his parents' bedroom and announced that he would be very glad to marry Barbara.

His father was wild with joy and, forgetting that he was clothed only in his long underpants, rushed out to the terrace to call Lawyer Ardizzone and tell him the news.

'*Rara avis*,' answered the old lawyer. He looked like a drooping old bird against the balcony railings bathed in starlight; he was glad of the opportunity to get these two words off his chest in the open air and pronounced them lovingly, in his deep voice; he had read them two hours ago and hadn't the slightest idea of what they meant.

'*Rara avis!* I am delighted and congratulate you most mightily!'

But his daughter, who, hidden from view in a dark corner, had been listening to Signor Alfio's words, was not of the same opinion; she felt her heart twist inside her like a fish writhing in a net.

'He's done it!' began Elena in a voice that she tried to keep cheerful, but soon became angry. 'He's done it! . . . That's typical of Catania! He goes and marries a girl he hasn't ever seen and turns a blind eye to the girl next door!'

'But, Elena!' mumbled her father, trying to push her back into her former place of concealment.

'But it's true, absolutely true! When we have a girl under our nose, we should at least take a look at her before making a false step in another quarter!'

'But, Elena! . . .'

'It's true that I am unlucky, unlucky; I was born unlucky. Not a single star watches over me; not a single saint suffers for me. What chance have I when even my own father thinks of nothing but the Senate? . . .'

'But, Elena, Elena, Elena!' cried her father on three different notes, his voice breaking on the last Elena, like a cracked bell. 'You don't know what you're saying! Elena, I say, Elena, Elena!' His voice cracked again. He turned to Signor Alfio. 'A thousand excuses, my dear friend! I beseech you to have the magnanimity to pardon me and to accept once more my . . . my . . . Good night, dear friend.'

The old lawyer retired indoors, agitatedly banging the shutters shut behind him.

Early the next morning Elena hurled three fat love diaries down on to the Magnano terrace; they contained drawings, dried butterflies and violets, small palm-tree branches and a photograph of Antonio on a wooden rocking-horse; this photo was the only one in existence and its loss had made Signora Rosaria very unhappy.

The diaries rained down on the terrace as Antonio was bending over to water the cacti. He didn't turn a hair

and, as he went on sprinkling water over thorns and petals alike, turned the pages with his foot, reading a phrase picked out by capital letters, here and there, such as: 'I would let HIM tread on my FACE'; 'From three to eight p.m. thought continuously about the same THING'; 'What dark circles under my eyes TODAY'. Antonio then tore out the photo, which he knew his mother wanted, and threw the diaries into the rubbish bin.

Two days later the porter's little boys were shouting out these fervid sentiments as they played in the courtyard below. Elena heard them and flew down the three flights of stairs, falling like a whirlwind on the unsuspecting urchins. They had been making hats and boats out of the paper covered with burning words which would have put a sudden end to their innocence if they had been able to read. With a single gesture, each time, Elena managed to snatch the papers away and twist the hands which clutched them, leaving groans and lamentations behind her.

That night she drank a glass of water in which she had soaked the heads of some twenty sulphur matches. Towards dawn she thought she was dying of the poison. Her poor mother rushed in and held her head while her father, half blind with fright, made an eloquent oration to Death, Life, Honour and Madness. Elena then vomited copiously into a basin, after which her recovery might be said to be complete.

The same day at lunch Signor Alfio gave a vivid description of the dramatic events which had happened to their neighbours and then turned to Antonio.

'What do you do to them, to the women, that's what I would like to know?' he asked.

His mother answered for him: 'What's it to do with him? The women tend their own fires!'

To avoid any other distressing incidents, the engagement to Barbara was announced at once; within a week Antonio found himself submerged, up to the neck, in the customs of an old Catanian family.

Giorgio Puglisi was the foremost notary of Catania. His house was in the Piazza Stesicoro, opposite the old Tribunal House. Etna seemed to be very near in this part of the city and to loom over the roofs of these buildings and to spread her two enormous wings above them, white as a swan in winter and violet at other times of the year. On this side the Piazza had been excavated, uncovering the arcades of a Roman theatre, encrusted with mould and crossed by passages that finally lost themselves in the subsoil of the city. This eastern side of the Piazza sloped like the deck of a foundered ship as it followed the angle of the side of a crater. From here a street climbed steeply to the upper city, one of the noisiest streets in Italy—and therefore in the world—as the trams ran up and down it with a fearful screech of brakes. It finally cut into the Via Etnea, beyond which was the other half of the Piazza, perfectly flat. There stood the marble statue of Vincenzo Bellini, adored by every Catanian; there he sat, smiling and surrounded by four of his famous characters, their mouths wide open, spreading to the winds the divine music of the composer. Here ended the little streets leading to the markets, the railway station and the brothels. Here, too, the sirocco stroked his damp belly with particular assiduity, with the result that road and pavement alike were perpetually swimming in a sea of mud.

The Puglisi house was built on the highest point of

the Piazza and was always aglow with light—even in winter; the dazzling sunshine, reflected from the snow on the slopes of Mount Etna, shone through its windows.

Signora Agatina, Barbara's mother, was very fat and endlessly loquacious; she was always tired and terrified of cold weather. She had finally succeeded in persuading her husband to be the first to install central heating in Catania. This step was entirely disapproved of by their friends; it was considered incompatible with the dignity of a man like Giorgio Puglisi, who was looked up to as Catania's most prominent and respected citizen. Almost every day parties of family friends trooped down the cellar steps, in company with the maids and any nursing babies that happened to be in the house; they wanted to examine and touch the furnace, which they considered to be the first indiscretion of a man whose judgment had hitherto been infallible. Little by little they became accustomed to the idea, and eventually two or three other families adopted the system. 'Obviously a man like Notary Puglisi could never do anything foolish!' they said.

This was the house, far too hot both in winter and in summer, in which Barbara spent her childhood and danced through her girlhood. As she flitted gaily through the corridors she was always being followed by a voice: 'Don't go too near the furnace!' and, when she ventured up a narrow stairway which led to one of the attics another voice: 'Don't go and disturb Papa Francesco!'

Papa Francesco, Signora Agatina's father, was really Barbara's grandfather; he was called Papa out of respect for his moneybags and his extremely aristocratic lineage. No one knew what king had dubbed him Baron Paternò.

An elaborate crest had been designed for him, but, as he loathed all books and never opened one, even if it was about heraldic emblems, it is doubtful whether he derived much enjoyment from these honours.

When Agatina married and left him he stayed on in his old palace with a decrepit manservant as his only companion. It was full of marble columns and statues, each of which brandished a wrought-iron lampstand. It dominated a piazza which was completely deserted save for the statue of King Umberto the First, the 'continental usurper'.

The old nobleman spent most of his days, forehead pressed against a balcony window, hating the statue.

'Paolino,' he would say to the old servant—himself half crazy as a result of so many years of obeying, without question, his master's half-crazy orders—'am I seeing things or is that fellow's face like the head of a badly bred horse?'

'It certainly has the head of a badly bred horse!' was the servant's invariable answer.

Then the City Council had plane trees planted all round the Piazza and in front of the palace. The trees grew up rapidly towards the most luminous sky in the world. As they cut out more and more light from the rooms of his palace, the baron grew more and more angry. He wrote letters to the papers, pestered the prefect, the Chief of Police, the Honourable Carnazza and his deadly enemy the Honourable De Felice, though raging inwardly at the indignity of having to call on such men, who were the representatives of fish-vendors and porters; but the trees had more vitality than he had and grew imperturbably higher and higher.

One night, however, the old servant, muffled in a

dark cloak, crept out of the palace gates towards the trees; one after another each tree trunk became the object of some mysterious operation. He repeated this ceremony each night for a month; when, lo and behold, those mighty trees, whose normal expectation of life would be at least two thousand years, suddenly commenced to droop and die, starting with the topmost leaves.

The baron's delight was unbounded when he saw the yellowing leaves from his balcony:

There was very nearly an open scandal, which was avoided only by virtue of his influence in high places and the expenditure of a considerable sum of money. Further, his son-in-law forced the tree poisoner to swallow his pride and—a horribly bitter pill—to leave his palace and come to live in the Piazza Stesicoro with his daughter and himself. Besides, whether as a result of an uneasy conscience or not, the old man, who had always slept in a bed previously occupied by Ferdinand the Second, suddenly conceived a liking for attics, unmade beds and dormer windows. He also developed a craving for loud noises. One day he bought a drum and, to the delight of his granddaughter, raised as much rumpus in his room as a regimental band. The neighbours objected, and his daughter had to beg him, with tears in her eyes, to forgo this form of amusement.

A compromise was arrived at. It was agreed that the baron should control his itch to beat the drum on weekdays; every Sunday he climbed into his brougham with his old servant, carrying the drum solemnly swathed in a scarlet cloth, and rode out of Catania—a stupid city which tolerated the unearthly din of its tramways and objected to the harmless rumble of his beloved drum!

The carriage stopped at one of his farms. He stalked through the trees, followed by his faithful servant carrying the drum and, respectfully saluted by the peasants. Finally he halted, unwrapped the drum, slung the strap over one shoulder, then raised the ebony sticks high in the air—but only for a moment. With frantic haste and force, beat followed beat. The drumhead trembled and resounded; chickens flew in all directions, chased by the dogs; the bulls moved majestically and slowly away, with a wary eye on the scarlet cloth lying on the grass; the old servant yawned.

For three hours the old man nearly deafened himself with his drumming; then the drum was wrapped in its scarlet cloth and the ride back to Catania began. But first there was an invariable ritual. As he opened the carriage door he asked his servant: 'How was it?'

'Magnificent,' answered his senile shadow.

But one night, the servant rose from his bed, stretched himself on a bench in the hall, and died.

The baron stood for a quarter of an hour looking down at the body of the man who had so often obeyed his orders.

'Who the devil made him do it?' he murmured twice and sent for Father Rosario, his son-in-law's brother, to come and see him in his attic, which, from that time onwards, he was never known to leave.

'Is there really a heaven?' he demanded point-blank, before the priest had crossed the threshold.

The priest sat down and explained to him, in great detail, just what, in his own view, the kingdom of heaven was like.

'You're a pack of liars and tricksters!' retorted the old man and sent him away.

But from that day onwards he frequently made the sign of the cross, hid little statues of saints under the cushions and fell on his knees whenever the word death passed through his mind. His hatred of priests was coupled with a form of bigotry which was more like idolatry. He believed in far more things than the dogma of the Church required, but obstinately refused to believe in the Church itself. He kept his shutters closed and the stench became overpowering. Gradually the old man's skin came to resemble the horny covering of chickens' legs. He kept one eye permanently closed, as if the eyelids had become glued together; the other eye emitted an uncertain and watery gleam, as if coming from a lantern left out in the driving rain.

He never opened his mouth, and caused trouble to no one. His brain, however, especially at night, seethed with furious thoughts, orders, shouting, prayers and outbursts of weeping.

Barbara was fascinated by this grandfather, who seemed to her to be more like a great big rag-doll. She had been forbidden by her mother to visit him, so she crept up the narrow stairs to the attic and gazed at the old man, by the hour, through a crack in the door. He never moved or made the slightest sound. She could not even hear him breathing. Nevertheless this desiccated, worn-out mummy was to live for another twenty years.

This curiosity of Barbara's was thoroughly disapproved by the Puglisi household. It made the notary, who hated any unseemly conduct, fly into a black rage. All the men of his family were grave and serious men, mostly notaries or senior administrators, repositories of the most fearful secrets. Dying men, who were succumbing to a sense of the irony and frivolity of the things of this world, were

soon frightened back to a proper sense of their duty towards the living by a solemn Puglisi face bending over them. The women of the family assiduously haunted the confessional. They had beautiful but very cold eyes which terrified novice preachers almost out of their wits, especially when they were about to launch the usual tirade against women. They were economical and efficient housewives; but they thought nothing of sitting for whole days and nights by the bedside of a maidservant who was seriously ill; and performing the most menial tasks for her. The most striking thing about both the men and the women was that they were absolutely normal, without a taint of abnormality. In a hundred years only three exceptional individuals had been born. In other families such people became artists, ne'er-do-wells, Don Juans or scientists; but the three Puglisis were treated as freaks and ended up in a lunatic asylum.

Notary Giorgio Puglisi realised that his marriage to the daughter of Baron Paternò implied relating himself to a man who was distinctly out of the ordinary. But at that time the baron's only eccentricity was his habit of telling people exactly what he thought of them. On the other hand, his wealth, surely the supreme hallmark of respectability, was in his favour. But the baron's conduct at the wedding was hardly calculated to reassure the good notary. As the latter knelt by the side of his bride-to-be the baron leaned over and whispered in his ear: 'I'll explode if I don't get this out of my system: you look more like a turkey than a man!'

Notary Giorgio was deeply shocked, but his common-sense gained the upper hand. 'It's done now; it's an accomplished fact. It would be useless and even harmful to consider an act as mistaken when it has assumed the

proportions of an irreparable and irrevocable error!' he said to himself. 'God preserve me from condemning this old man as an outright eccentric! He meant well. What he said could be interpreted as a gesture of affection, and, in any case, no one heard him. As for my children, if I have any . . . the Lord will help me!'

The first years of this marriage were very happy. Barbara was born in 1914. In 1920 the baron retired to his attic, leaving the management of all his possessions in the hands of the notary, a state of affairs which admirably suited the notary. He would have been perfectly happy if it had not been for Barbara's sudden and inexplicable interest in the old man. Why this inordinate curiosity on the part of a child of six? What was in her little mind, as she stared for such long periods of time through the crack in the door—satisfaction, irony, fear, cruelty or pity?

One day her uncle, the priest, took her on his knee and tried to pump her, but, for all his subtle wiles, was completely unsuccessful.

Some years later Barbara formed the habit of listening, with the same wrapt attention, to the swallows on the roof. They flew blindly into the chimney-pots and, stunned by the revolving arms of the weathercock, were sucked down the chimney. Finally, after interminable struggles, more dead than alive, they fell in the ashes of the fireplace, where Barbara collected them.

This further proof of eccentricity in his daughter terrified the notary. At this rate, where would it end? He gave a donation of two thousand lire for the foundation of an orphanage. A few years later the Lord vouchsafed him his reward: Barbara, the cause of so much worry in childhood, became a most staid and mediocre young

girl, so much so that she was the spit and image of at least ten of her female forebears.

'Do you remember,' the notary would say to his wife, gazing fondly at Barbara, 'when my mother was knitting a sock? She moved her mouth just like that! . . . Do you remember my Aunt Mariannina when she was winding the alarm clock? She used to pout just like that! . . . Do you remember my sister Maria when she was setting the table? She used to pick up four glasses at a time, with her fingers round them, just like Barbara does!'

Barbara learned to play the violin and to paint; she saw and heard all the best plays, concerts and lectures, but, needless to say, no ideas as to the nature of art or any conception of the possibility of intellectual thinking entered or ruffled the glassy calm of her virgin mind.

But one should not assume that this balanced and composed young woman was insensible to the higher emotions. She was alternately happy and unhappy, like all young people; she, too, dreamed about the future; she, too, as she watched the night sky and heard neither sound nor voice, thought with dismay that the universe was empty; she, too, prayed to God both in her lighter and more serious moods; and at sixteen, unlike the aesthetes, tortured and consumed by their love of beauty and their search for the unattainable, with their hollow cheeks, long noses and bags under their eyes, Barbara was as fresh and lovely as a flower.

## CHAPTER FOUR

'Enchanted, he will sing that thou, already, hast made thy husband happy.'

G. PARINI

'A lovely purple rose will Silvio choose today.'

P. ROLLI

**I**N 1933 THE Puglisi family first heard of a projected measure, which, if carried through, would cost them three-quarters of their fortune.

The mayor, no respecter of persons or titles, was determined to municipalise the springs of Pomiciaro, which belonged to the baron.

The notary, when he heard this incredible report, despatched his wife and daughter to the theatre, sent the maids packing and, having locked and barred all the windows and doors, cried in a loud voice: 'Thieves! Robbers! You shan't steal *my* property!'

Whereupon he hastened to Rome. Alas, there he was unknown and that city was entirely lacking in persons ready to render him the homage to which he was accustomed. He languished in waiting-rooms for days on end until he realised that only the Minister, Count K., could save him by cursing at the mayor over the telephone, as he invariably did when he lost his temper. This was the reason for his sudden interest in Antonio, after his return to Catania; this young man was an intimate friend of the Minister in question, an extremely handsome fellow and, therefore, an excellent match for his daughter.

Barbara, as soon as she was told that Antonio was to be her husband, gladly allowed her thoughts to stray in his direction. Although she had only caught a fleeting glimpse of him on two or three occasions, her dreams about him were extraordinarily lifelike; hence the pleasant perturbation of her senses when, encouraged by her mother and in the presence of admiring female visitors, she spread out on the balcony railings those very sheets which, on the blessed night, would enfold her in the company of the handsomest man in Catania.

The engagement was announced in the presence of relatives only. His friend d'Agata had to content himself with a telephone call: 'Is your fiancée by your side?'

'No, the telephone is a long way from the drawing-room and the notary doesn't want Barbara to be alone with me!'

'Have you kissed her yet?'

'... No!'

'Lord love us! When are you going to?'

'Goodbye, Luigino, goodbye!' Antonio laughed, and he went back to the drawing-room.

There he was embraced by three monsignors with crosses dangling from their black satin waistbands and received a paternal caress from Father Rosario. Everyone was shouting and banging the plates with their spoons; somebody was playing the radiogram, somebody else was banging on the piano; the din was terrific and made even more deafening\* by the sound of Sicilian bagpipes. It was just before Christmas and the bagpipe players were solemnly marching up the stairs, right into the kitchen. The rain was beating against the balcony windows, and swift, low clouds were passing

over the court-house roof, completely hiding Mount Etna.

'It is time for us to go up and pay a visit to Grandfather! The poor old man will be delighted to see us!' Barbara announced in a loud voice, when the court-house clock struck seven.

A small party consisting of the notary, Signora Agatina, Father Rosario and the two betrothed trooped up the dark little stairway and tiptoed into the attic.

They stood silently around the old man, who was sitting on his cot; his head was bowed and he was staring at his two withered hands, which were limply resting on the coverlet.

Antonio wanted to say something, but waited for someone else to speak or do something. But nobody moved or spoke; they behaved as if they were standing in front of a tombstone.

Suddenly Signor Alfio burst into the room, shouting: 'But what . . .' He immediately lowered his voice. 'What the devil are you doing here?'

The ninety-year-old baron looked up at the new arrival, managed painfully to open his mouth and said: 'The trees! . . . Assessor! . . .' and fell sideways like a sheet of cardboard blown over by the wind. He had recognised Signor Alfio as one of the assessors of Catania at the time when the city had dared to plant plane trees in front of his house.

'Go away! Go downstairs!' the notary told them. 'It is nothing! Agatina and I will look after him! The rest of you go downstairs, especially you young people, go and have a good time!'

The notary pushed them out of the door, repeating, again and again, 'It's nothing!' The word 'nothing'

followed them right up to the threshold of the drawing-room, where it was drowned by the dance music.

Actually the old baron was dead. But the fact was not disclosed until the next day.

His father advised Antonio to wear a black tie; this intensified the natural pallor of his face and made it look like an old-fashioned daguerrotype; so much so that a group of anti-Fascists muttered, as he passed their café table: 'He looks like Brutus, but he's got the job of emptying pisspots for Ministers and Federal Secretaries! If I were in his place, I'd arrange an audience for myself with Mussolini and present him with five nice bullets in the belly!'

Two days later a long procession followed the baron to the cemetery. Antonio and his fiancée, seen together for the first time in public, headed the procession, followed by a jet-black flock of sorrowing relatives. Then came a double row of Orphans of the Sacred Heart singing the *Miserere*; next a string of carriages with their loads of wreaths; and finally a crowd of friends and acquaintances, chattering away and slipping off, by twos and threes, to the nearest café.

The dead man had been so old that no one felt under any obligation to pump up crocodile tears. They all smiled at Antonio and his betrothed. Many of the girls and young women focused binoculars on Antonio's head and his right arm through which Barbara had slipped her jewelled hand.

Antonio felt his mother's and father's hands touch his shoulders; straightening his coat collar was their pretext for satisfying their urge to show him affection.

His mother then lifted his left hand and placed it on Barbara's; but, noticing that she had covered up his

fiancée's engagement ring, quickly snatched his hand away again, blushing at if she had committed a serious indiscretion.

From time to time Antonio felt a mouth near his ear, whispering: 'Put your hat on! . . . I wouldn't like you to catch cold! . . . You ought to be wearing an overcoat! . . . Don't stare up at the balconies, remember that you are engaged! . . . The prefect smiled at you just now; why don't you smile back at him? . . . I wonder why the mayor isn't here?'

Suddenly the notary appeared at Antonio's side.

'You must write to the Minister!' he said to him in a low voice. 'The mayor must have a guilty conscience not to have put in an appearance today!'

'I'll write to him tomorrow. But you mustn't think that I . . .'

Signor Alfio, who had been eavesdropping, dug his elbow into Antonio's ribs to stop him from saying anything more.

'That son of yours,' he whispered to his wife, 'is his own worst enemy! If I hadn't been behind him he would have told the notary that he wasn't friendly with the Minister.'

'He's too modest,' murmured the signora.

'He's an imbecile!' retorted his father, pale with rage and gesticulating so violently that he knocked off his own hat.

'Everybody is staring at us; be quiet!' said his wife, standing by his side while he picked up his hat. Just then a string of Puglisi girls, straight and stiff as the Madonnas in a religious procession, passed them and separated them from their son.

'Perhaps it would be better if you wrote today,' con-

tinued the notary. 'Let's make it a registered and express letter and I'll post it myself at the station. Do you know his private address?'

'I know where he lives because I've been to lunch there once or twice.'

'Is that all?' said the notary with surprise. 'I thought you went to his house almost every evening!'

'Oh no.'

'Did he go to your flat instead?'

'We met in town,' said Antonio to cut the conversation short.

The funeral procession halted in a Piazzetta near the Porta Garibaldi. The orator already stood on the steps of the church in the act of pulling a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his lips; the prickly-pear vendors pushed their barrows through the procession and stacked them against a wall; a tram stopped opposite the church, overflowing with passengers, who fought each other to reach the platform railings to get a better view of the proceedings.

'Who's the speaker?' Antonio asked his father-in-law.

'Lawyer Bonaccorsi, a friend of my father.'

'Why have the baron's eulogy delivered by an anti-Fascist?' asked a stranger.

'He's the best lawyer in Catania, a gentleman who has never done anybody a bad turn!' replied the notary emphatically.

'He was a Socialist!' called out the voice.

'Was, was. . . . We all were. . . . You should judge a person by what he is, not what he was!'

'Twenty years ago Baron Puglisi was compelled by circumstances beyond his control to part from all his friends . . .' intoned the orator, beginning his speech.

'I am surprised,' said the ubiquitous voice, 'that a Socialist should pronounce the word "Baron" with such respect!'

'You're a disgruntled fool!' retorted the notary angrily. He had recognised the heckler, a slender youth of eighteen, the son of one of his own tenants, whom he had every intention of evicting in the near future, as he never paid his rent on time.

At this juncture there was a buzz of voices in the crowd near the tram; the prefect could be seen, turning on his heel and walking away, followed by five other persons.

'That's an insult!' exclaimed the notary. 'A real insult! . . . Antonio, what do you advise me to do?'

'Nothing!' answered Antonio.

'Do you think that means that he is going to try and make it hot for us?'

'We've sunk pretty low, but not so low as to have to be afraid of a petty pen-pusher in Catania when we have friends in Rome!'

At that moment Antonio was on the crest of one of the sudden waves of happiness which swept over him frequently ever since his engagement to Barbara.

'Oh God!' he thought. 'If I'd wanted . . . How stupid to be afraid that . . .'

At the same time all his recollections of Rome, stored away in his memory as cold and bleak as geometric patterns on a blackboard, were bathed in light, in vivid colours and pungent odours, from the scent of the dried fruit in the little streets of the Trevi quarter in December to the smell of the wolves in the zoo.

'Why do I get all churned up with emotion when Barbara takes her hand away from mine? I can feel

the blood beating in my temples like a hammer. . . . If I'm not mistaken, when she blushes, her skin gives off a much more powerful odour. . . .'

Secure in his newly won sense of happiness, he began to browse, in retrospect, over his years in Rome; he now found no difficulty in looking events and people squarely in the face, instead of timidly dropping his eyes. Why had he been such a fool? Mentally he was picturing himself treating the Countess K. with a virile and intimate brutality, when he noticed that the orator's speech had come to an end. The coffin was mounted on the hearse. The procession was disbanded. Barbara was sent home with her parents-in-law, but the notary and Antonio, in a landau, accompanied the baron to the cemetery. Antonio, it must be confessed, was scarcely in the right mood for a funeral. In fact, as the walls of the cemetery of Acquicella loomed slowly into sight over the black plumes of the horses, he was the happiest man under thirty in all Sicily.

Thus the old baron was lowered into his family tomb in an atmosphere of cheerfulness rather than sadness; his handsome grandson's eyes glowed with happiness, and, as the coffin disappeared within the gloomy vault, it never once occurred to Antonio that, enclosed in the wood, there lay a man.

The notary reproved the caretaker for the condition in which he kept the cemetery: 'The paths are covered with tangerine skins and greaseproof paper! We pay a nice fat sum every month, my friend, and have the right to insist that our dead rest in clean and decorous surroundings!'

He looked around, as if he expected a smile of approval from the porcelain faces set in the tombstones.

'Let's go home,' he added, turning to Antonio. 'Barbara will be waiting for you on the balcony!'

When the landau reached the Piazza Stesicoro they looked up at the Puglisi house, but found the balconies empty and the shutters closed.

'I'm a blockhead!' said the notary. 'I forgot that we are in mourning.'

The front door, left on the latch, was covered with black ribbons and cards edged with a damp dense black; in the middle there was a prominent black cross, with the words: 'TO OUR FATHER' . . . 'TO OUR FATHER-IN-LAW' . . . 'TO OUR BELOVED GRANDFATHER'.

The doorman was dressed in black and the callers, who groped their way through the darkened entrance hall, also wore mourning.

'I had better wear black, too!' thought Antonio, as he climbed the stairs.

'I am sorry,' said the notary by his side, 'that your rejoicing has been interfered with by this unhappy event! But they say that it is lucky. Just the same, I can hardly wait until we can open the shutters again and let the air in here. . . . Tonight we must write that letter to the Minister.'

Antonio sat down at once and wrote the famous letter; the notary had it copied twice on the typewriter and re-read it at least a hundred times. He could not get over his disappointment at the fact that Antonio was not on terms of thee and thou with the Minister.

'Will he answer?' the notary kept saying over and over again until Barbara lost patience and said, in a severe tone of voice: 'Papa! . . .'

After a week the Minister did answer, announcing

that the mayor, 'for this and that and other reasons, all very serious', was to be replaced.

The notary was overjoyed and, overcoming his natural reticence, passed on this tit-bit of news to the prefecture.

'It is strange,' said the offended prefect, 'that I know nothing at all about this. Am I to believe that the Minister reveals his decisions to private individuals? . . . by this I intend no reflection on your son-in-law; I know that he is highly thought of in Rome. . . . But, after all, it is I who am His Excellency's representative, and I have the honour to carry out his orders. No, my dear Notary, I beg leave to doubt that the mayor's dismissal has been signed. . . . It may well be the Minister's intention which may be implemented in the more or less distant future, but at the present moment, today . . . I still have my doubts!'

The notary flushed. 'He may be right!' he thought. 'A singularly imprudent act on my part! If the prefect is right I shall have to close my office and move to another city. My mistake was to rely upon a mere youth. . . . He who sleeps in the same bed as a baby must expect to get up the next morning soaked in urine!'

Nevertheless, three days later, the prefect was called to the telephone by the Minister.

'What's the news from Catania?' he asked brusquely. 'What do your police do at night? I have been told that someone has scribbled two verses about me on the walls of the public urinal in Via Paolini, which are being recited all over Italy; even by those crazy intellectuals at the Café Aragno!' The Minister then proceeded to inform him that the mayor was to pack his bags and give up his office.

The news spread like wildfire through the city and caused Antonio to be saluted, with great respect, by a host of perfect strangers. His name was in every gossip's mouth: 'He's a young man with great influence! . . . Count K. would do anything for him!'

When this was first repeated to him Antonio flew into a rage. He stopped short in front of the old gentleman who had told him and stared angrily at him. The old man was frightened. 'I only said that you were an influential young man,' he stammered. 'You take it as if it were an insult! I am an old friend of your father's; it was Signor Alfio himself who told me . . .'

Antonio turned his back and walked off without letting him finish his sentence but from then on he became suspicious of his father. He began to watch him until the day when, through the door that was ajar, he heard him saying: 'He takes after me and his grandfather! If we Magnanos so much as touch a woman with one finger she lies down. . . . I don't know what my son's relationship with the countess may be, but I do know that any woman he has been with smacks her lips over it for the rest of her life.'

Antonio waited until his father's friends had left and then glared at him furiously.

'What's biting you?' said his father. 'Why are you looking at me like that?'

'I heard what you were saying just now.'

'Well, did I say anything wrong? Is there anything wrong in knowing how to mount a filly? It would be shameful not to know how or to do it badly!'

Antonio stamped his foot with rage. 'But don't you understand that? . . .'

'Stop, my friend!' interrupted his father. 'I understand perfectly well. But kindly understand that I have a perfect right to talk about my son when and how I please!'

Antonio could not say anything more and the next morning he telephoned to his friend Edoardo.

'I was just going to ring you myself,' said Edoardo. 'I have something very important to talk to you about. Wait for me, I'll be with you in a jiffy!'

When Edoardo arrived he was panting. There were red rings around his eyes; he looked exhausted and tormented as if he were the victim of an unrequited passion. The two friends went out on the terrace.

'I'm disgusted with myself!' said Edoardo, leaning on the balustrade which jutted out over the sun-drenched street. 'We've sunk so low that we are lower than the animals!'

'Who?' asked Antonio.

'All of us . . . you, me . . . especially me!'

'Why?'

'I haven't slept for six nights. I haven't eaten for six days. Yesterday, in the street, I had to lean on a beggar or else I would have fainted from weakness! And, in the bargain, I am in a perpetual state of intense sexual excitement. Nothing I can do stops it. . . . I keep going to the Pensione Eros, but that doesn't satisfy me. . . . Why, today I even ogle our maid when she passes and she's over fifty and as ugly as sin. . . .'

'But what's the reason?'

'Antonio, listen to me: I must be Mayor of Catania! I must be! It's a matter of honour now between me and myself, between myself and all my relatives who think that I don't count! You must write to the Minister! If

necessary we'll both go to Rome together . . . I'll pay all the expenses! But it is absolutely vital for me to be appointed Mayor of Catania! It means more than life to me.' Then, half-closing his eyes and drinking in the mild February air, he added: 'This crowd can't last, if it is true that they are preparing an expedition against Abyssinia. Only a school-teacher could be ignorant enough to attempt today what England did three centuries ago! Read what Croce writes!'

'Who?' said Antonio.

'Benedetto Croce; don't you know him? It's only because of the fact of his living here that Italy can claim to be a human habitation, otherwise it would simply be a sheep pen. . . .'

Edoardo pulled out a copy of the *History of Europe* and read several pages which he had marked with 'No!' . . . 'Nonsense!' . . . 'Nooo!' in case the book fell into the hands of a political fanatic or a police spy.

Edoardo read with great emotional intensity. The small terrace, with its greenery which threw purple shadows against the sun, heard the word LIBERTY pronounced in despairing accents by a man of thirty-two who knew that his lack of strength and moral courage involved his forfeiting it for ever.

Antonio nearly succumbed to the emotional fervour of his friend, but a thought flashed across his mind like a scorpion: 'How many times did you go to the Eros?' he asked.

'Yesterday three times!' answered Edoardo, interrupting his reading. 'The day before yesterday—you won't believe me—four times!'

'And with the old maid . . . what happened?'

'Oh, nothing! I winked at her and sighed as if I

wanted to be her lover, then I shouted "Boo!" at her and pretended it was all a joke. I beg of you, Antonio, please, my dearest friend, write to the Minister today!"

Antonio obediently wrote his second letter to the Minister, but this time it was not so successful. The Minister sent back a very cordial answer, regretting that he was unable to oblige his friend Antonio, seeing that the nomination of Edoardo Lentini as Mayor of Catania did not meet with the approval of Federal Secretary Calderara. The position was to be given to Vice-Prefect Solarino, a man of fifty, not a bad sort, but cut off from any real enjoyment for over thirty years; he was also the author of a few anti-French and anti-Russian sonnets.

Learning that the main obstacle to the chief objective of his life was Lorenzo Calderara, Edoardo attempted to get into his good graces; to this end he haunted the headquarters of the Fascist Federation in the charming Vaccarini Palace. This was guarded by two militiamen, whose manner was a compound of slackness and bravado; each of them hugged the butt of a huge rifle, much heavier than himself, against his belly; they challenged each visitor with: 'Doff your hat, comrade!' Edoardo became so assiduous in his attempts to curry favour with Calderara that he found himself considering his own acts intelligent only when they pleased that profoundly stupid man.

Antonio, for his part, concerned himself entirely with his private life and spent five happy months with his betrothed in spite of the fact that she kept him dangling at the long end of a rope; it was only on Sundays, on the way back from Mass, that she allowed him to run up the stairs beside her—her parents left puffing a long way

behind—and to kiss her on the mouth on the landing, near the ground-glass window.

He had also tried to snatch a kiss in the drawing-room, late in the evening, when the notary dropped off to sleep; but Barbara silently fought him off, jumped up from her chair and ran out of the room. When she had shut the door her knees were trembling so violently that she had to lean against it. When she returned to the room, her lovely green eyes, which played such havoc with the Lenten preachers, expressed a distinct change for the worse in her mood; the dark circles under them had also become intensified. This mixture of physical excitement and moral reserve in his beloved had a disastrous effect on Antonio. He found her altogether too alluring and was obliged to excuse himself half an hour earlier than usual.

He wandered through the streets, lanes and squares, obsessed with a vision of his betrothed, who, pure as spring water, was sleeping in the most austere building in Catania and was destined for him alone. Distracted by his thoughts of her, he walked for a long time, right through the silent city, through the suburbs, almost into the country. He saw very little of his immediate surroundings as he walked with his head thrown back and his eyes fixed on the sky; that vivid, warm, full sky of the south which begins immediately where the roof or the terrace or the tree-top ends—not vague, cold and thin, as it is in the cities of the north, but as thick, dense, majestic and taciturn as it must be a thousand light years from the earth.

A breath of cold air made him shiver slightly, and sent him home, tired and happy, and plunged him into a long sleep quite free from the disturbing dreams which

had haunted his nights before his thrice-blessed engagement.

One afternoon in March, Barbara decided she wanted to accompany Antonio, Signora Agatina and Signor Alfio, who were going to inspect the Magnano property on the Catania plain. An old carriage, unsteady and odoriferous, carried them at a leisurely pace into the heart of this lovely plain lapped in the yellow glow of sirocco and sand, by the waves of the Ionian sea. A green vista of fields extends from the fine golden sands of the shore southward to the mountains of Syracuse and Lentini, northward to the walls of Catania; there the last outlying houses cling to the steep slopes of Mount Etna, which stands out in all its vast bulk, disconcerting, solitary and matchless like the surviving wall of a ruined temple.

On March afternoons an extraordinary pellucid light trembles over this countryside, swept by the wind which seems to beat against the sky and drives a curtain of clouds, now red, now yellow, now turquoise, now brown, across the sun.

As soon as they arrived within sight of the great iron gate leading to the Magnano property Signor Alfio tamped out his pipe with his thumb.

'Here's what sucks my life blood away! Get ready to drown in a flood of complaints!' he exclaimed.

He was referring to the bailiff, a thin old man dressed in fustian trousers and a dust-stained, pleated white shirt; his sleeves were rolled up, showing his sinewy arms, burned almost black by the sun; his face was strong and deeply lined, with two bright little eyes hidden in the depths of large bony sockets; a red handkerchief was tied loosely around his neck.

The bailiff straightened up from his work and rested his hands on the handle of his hoe, then he raised his right hand, seized his cap by its visor, tried clumsily to lift it off his head, and, twisting it as if it were glued to his scalp, finally managed to tear it off. He held it above his head for a moment, then abruptly let it fall back on to his head.

‘Well, Nunzio!’ shouted Signor Alfio, sticking his head out of the carriage window. ‘How’s the work going?’

The peasant lowered his eyes and shook his head, swallowing a mumbled reply.

‘When did you start hoeing?’

‘This morning,’ answered the other, keeping his eyes averted.

‘How’s it going?’

‘Badly.’

‘Why, badly?’

‘Because it’s going badly.’

‘You, brother mine, wouldn’t have any pleasure left in life if you were not allowed to complain! I came,’ he continued in another tone of voice, ‘to show the oranges to my daughter-in-law.’

‘Oranges? What oranges? Where are these oranges of yours?’

Signor Alfio climbed painfully out of the carriage, to give himself enough room to wave his arms about. ‘Listen, for the love of God! Don’t make me lose my temper! My daughter-in-law is here today and that makes it a feast-day for everybody, and I don’t want to have to shout and curse at you. Will you get out!’ he added, sticking his head into the carriage and calling to the others.

‘How lovely it is!’ said Signora Agatina. ‘I must congratulate you, Father Alfio! I had no idea it was so beautiful.’

The grain crops were already full grown; the enormous number of poppies, of all sizes, gave a ruddy glow to the golden grain. The olive trees, dusted with silver, stood spaced at regular intervals, looking like people who have stopped to wait for others who have been left behind; the avenue climbed up a little hill, crowned by a yellow summer-house with green blinds; nearby stood the barn, with white-washed walls and black windows and doors; to the right of the avenue the bright-green lemon groves swept up to the crest of the hill and, beyond, to a second hillock, on which an enormous well had been built of hardened lava blocks.

Signor Alfio pointed his stick proudly towards the well.

‘Look, Mother Agatina! That’s my well! . . . These stupid clods here’—he gestured towards the bailiff and a few peasants who were standing near him—‘kept telling me that we would hit salt water. But I stood my ground and said: “No, the sea stays in the sea, not inside the earth! We’re going to dig and we’re going to find fresh water!” If I had not been as stubborn as a mule, the lovely gardens you are looking at today would exist only in the mind of God. . . . Everything here, dear lady, everything, is the fruit of my obstinacy. Every tree here means damnation for me, for I had to blaspheme a hundred times to get it put in the right place. . . . Come here, look!’

Rejuvenated by the country air, Signor Alfio trotted rapidly up the avenue. The bailiff followed him on one side, still scowling, and Signora Agatina on the other, holding her hat, which was decorated with large feathers. There was a stiff breeze. Barbara followed on behind,

with her hand in Antonio's and a happy smile on her face at the thought that, one day, all this would be hers.

'Here are the oranges! Aren't they beautiful?' exclaimed Signor Alfio, pointing with his stick at a plot of ground, beyond the lemons, studded thickly with bright-red oranges, 'Ahoy there, man and beast!' he shouted, and, turning to the bailiff, 'You're not going to tell me that these aren't oranges?'

The man made a wry face and stared at the ground.

'Well, what have you to say?' urged Signor Alfio. 'Have you lost your tongue?'

'But where do you see these oranges?' groaned the man.

'What? Where do I see them? Here, here and there! Come over here, come closer; look at what I am touching with my stick; this, what is it?'

The peasant pursed his lips and squinted at the ground.

'Answer me, in the name of all the saints, what is it?'

The fellow continued to say nothing.

'What is it? . . . a potato? . . . a tomato? . . . or a dried-up cucumber like you?'

'This is an orange. But what do you think of that?'

'What do you mean, blockhead? What I think is that these are oranges.'

'Only one,' said the man, raising his finger and pointing vaguely, first to the left and then to the right. 'And for just one . . .' he exclaimed after a pause, as if to say: 'Why are you making such a fuss over a single orange?'

'But there, there, there and there, can't you see the other oranges?'

'A few . . . nothing to speak of!'

'Nothing? . . . Have you gone blind?'

'I'm not blind. It's you who are seeing double today, Alfio!'

'Oh, so it's me who can't see straight this evening? The only time *my* eyes went back on me, brother mine, was the day I took you on to farm this accursed land. Oh, if only my guardian angel had appeared to tell me how bitterly I should regret it! . . . But Communism is coming. Ye gods, I'll laugh my guts out watching you cope with that!'

'Is Communism coming now? Who'd have thought that?'

'Yes, Communism is coming all right!'

Signora Agatina began to feel out of her depth and looked at the betrothed couple for an explanation, but Antonio simply winked.

'What have I got to lose, anyway?' said the peasant.

'What you'll lose is that you won't be able to do just what you feel like doing all day; no more stealing; they'll put a chain around your neck like a dog; they'll chain you to a tree and make you work like a nigger until you croak!'

Meanwhile they had reached the top of the hill. Dogs were barking on all sides, shaking the fence posts and the kennels to which they were tied; chickens were wildly flapping their wings behind the loudly crowing cocks and a flock of yellow baby chicks—all frantically trying to escape.

'But it's you who'll lose your land!' added the man.

'All right, I'll lose my land! Nothing will give me greater pleasure than to lose it; at any rate, in that way it won't end up inside your belly, this accursed land!'

'But why do you keep calling this land accursed? The Lord gave it to you, didn't He.'

'Yes, accursed, trebly accursed and unlucky, because I had to go and put it in your hands! What do I ever get out of this accursed land? Not so much as a leaf of lettuce for salad! But you think that you're going to get my land for yourself when Communism comes! You're crazy! When those fellows get here, no one will have any land. The only land you'll ever get will be your measly plot in the cemetery! I tell you that they'll make you walk along a chalk line; they'll make you sweat blood, because if you don't work until you sweat blood they'll hang you on a locust tree and let the ants eat you. Do you suppose that the Communists are like Alfio Magnano? Those fellows, brother mine, will bury you alive, with your head sticking up out of the ground, and then they'll trample on your eyes!'

'I don't know much, Alfio, but I don't want Communism nor anything else so new-fangled: all I want is to go on working.'

'Work as little as possible and steal as much as possible! That's what you want.'

'I don't steal, Alfio.'

'You'd eat me alive, if you could.'

'I don't eat nobody!'

'That's enough!' shouted Signor Alfio in a rage. 'That's enough! Do you understand? You're not going to talk to me in that tone of voice! That's enough!'

'Now what is the matter with you two? You're always rowing!' shrilled a nonagenarian peasant woman from the doorway of the barn, brandishing a large, gnarled hand at the end of a thin arm. 'You're brothers, aren't you? Suckled at the same breast, as like as peas in a pod, yet you're always scrapping like dogs over a bone.'

'Mamma Tanina,' answered Signor Alfio, going close

to her eyes, which could only distinguish shadows and not even shapes; pupil and white were mixed like the white and yellow of a broken egg. 'Mamma Tanina, my precious foster-brother here, after he had had a good suck at his own breast, used to come and pinch mine. Isn't that true?'

The old woman's face flushed; blood flowed into her eyes and toothless gums, imparting a bright scarlet colour to them. She was smiling.

'Eh, Mamma Tanina, don't deny it! That's what he did, the scoundrel!'

'That's true enough,' agreed the old crone, waving her hand towards her own son Nunzio and her foster son, Signor Alfio.

'Do you see? He robbed me then and he robs me now!'

The old woman ducked her head, just like a young girl who wants to hide the fact that she is smiling.

'Oh, Alfio, Alfio!' she crowed. 'You've always been the same. Always one for a laugh and a joke!'

'Oh, Nunzio, Nunzio! . . . he's the one you should be calling, Mamma Tanina!'

As Alfio now seemed to be in a better temper and was actually smiling, Barbara put her hand on Antonio's shoulder and said, 'Come on, take me over to the well!'

'To the well?' said Antonio doubtfully, looking towards the wind-swept hill-top.

'Are you asking him to take you to the well, Barbara?' interposed Signor Alfio. 'He wouldn't know how to get there.'

'Doesn't he know the way?' asked Barbara.

'I'm serious. He's no idea of the way! I've sweated blood to get this bit of God's ground fat and fertile, ready

for him to take over, and he doesn't even know one path from another; he doesn't know his way around at all.'

'That's not true, Papa!' said Antonio, having spotted the shortest way to the well and taking Barbara's hand in his. 'Come along!'

'I'm coming, too!' shouted Signor Alfio.

But the young couple were already scampering along a path which ran along on the top of an embankment and skirted a small stream; they soon reached the other hill-top where there was a high wind, which hurled itself against the lava blocks of the well.

Barbara made a splendid figure, hair streaming in the wind, as she surveyed the olive trees, lemon groves and grain fields which stretched out beyond the horizon.

'It's magnificent!' she exclaimed, turning to Antonio.

The others were still a long way off; she turned towards him, clasped him in her arms and kissed him passionately. This was the first time since they had known each other that she had taken the initiative.

'Darling, darling!' she repeated. 'I adore you!'

Antonio needed no urging to respond with equal fervour. This was a moment of incredibly intense joy for Antonio. The memory of this ecstasy was enough to lift him into a mood of happiness which lasted throughout their engagement.

This beatific mood was only put to flight during the actual marriage ceremony. As he knelt on a velvet cushion and heard all the prominent men and all the most beautiful women of Catania rustling and bustling behind him, it suddenly seemed to him that the walls of the church towered out of sight and a cage took their place; the music pealing from the organ and rising from

the oak-panelled choir with a soaring crescendo of boyish voices seemed an additional barrier to his escape.

Feeling like a hunted animal in a trap, he looked over his shoulder; instead of reassuring him, the faces he saw terrified him all the more, especially the lovely faces of the young women, whose expressions seemed to him to express a malevolent curiosity, an ironic challenge and a sort of gloating satisfaction. Towering above the others, his father's black-coated profile stood out clearly; a single tear glistened in Signor Alfio's eye.

But Antonio's black mood lasted but a moment. The rustle of Barbara's dress as she rose to her feet made him catch his breath; as usual, when he was physically close to her, he was thrilled by a feeling of almost unbearable excitement. It was 5th July 1935. That day, Antonio's beauty stirred even the priests, not excepting the sternest of them all who had refused absolution to the Archbishop's niece for having succumbed too often to the sin of having tried to draw Antonio's body on the banisters. A wretched club-footed cretin had managed to slip through the elegant crowd, streaming down the nave of the church; he limped ahead to clear a way for Antonio, dancing with excitement and emitting uncouth, inarticulate cries; the bridegroom made him think of regimental bands, parades, flags and firecrackers, everything that he associated with festivals and beauty.

The young women hugged and kissed Barbara, allowing their envious eyes to stray, over her shoulder, towards Antonio. That soured spinster, Elena Ardizzone, however, stood apart, at the foot of a pillar; there was an automatic revolver in her alligator bag; she was savouring the bitter satisfaction of being in a position to strike down Antonio at any minute; it was only thanks to her

magnanimity that this handsome youth could stand, so unsuspectingly, by the side of her hated rival. Big tears rolled down the faded cheeks as she succumbed to an access of self-pity; she thought how good, noble, generous and superior she was not to use the revolver, which, incidentally, had never been loaded.

The men became increasingly jealous as they watched their wives, who were red and agitated as if they and not Barbara had married Antonio. To take their minds off this spectacle, the men started talking about politics, not without first looking around to see if it was safe to mention the head of the government—not, of course, in a derogatory context. The chief clerk to the commune maintained that there was to be a great military expedition in the autumn against Abyssinia and he had, accordingly, composed a sonnet to that effect the day before. This he now proceeded, unasked, to recite. This infuriated Notary Puglisi.

‘No talk about war, for pity’s sake!’ he began. ‘Let’s keep off the topic of war on a day like this, at any rate! Let’s leave now!’ They all trooped out behind the bride and groom.

Outside the church a platinum sky threw a blinding light down on to the street; a crowd had been waiting there and pointed to the young couple as they stood on the steps of the church.

Young women and girls were jostling each other on the balconies opposite to get a good view of the happy pair; they were all in a state of great emotional agitation, in particular one buxom wench: she was oblivious to the crowd, the bride, the stairs, the façade of the church and the blazing midday sun and was imagining herself alone with Antonio in circumstances of peculiar intimacy,

more appropriate to the bridal suite than to a crowded street!

Finally the cars, which had been waiting in a side street, drew up before the church steps and the young couple, the relatives and guests disappeared inside them. The procession moved off, but came to a halt after a few yards, as it had already reached the Piazza Stesicoro, underneath Notary Puglisi's house. Some of the women covered the short distance along Via Etnea, which separated the church from the Piazza, at a gallop, to catch one more glimpse of the bride and Antonio, as they got out of the car, struggling with a gigantic bouquet of carnations.

At this moment the Marquis of San Lorenzo stood stock-still in the middle of the Piazza, one clenched hand on hip, his slender riding-master's body erect and stiff as a poker, seriously considering whether it was his duty to denounce all these relatives of his whom he saw wearing tights in spite of the Secretary-General of the party's specific ban on this practice. At this moment also a young woman cried out: 'I'm sure that we shan't see Antonio walking along the Via Etnea at two in the afternoon any more. We young ones are done for now our youth is finished!'

This young woman was not mistaken. After their marriage, Antonio and Barbara led a secluded life and were rarely seen on the streets of Catania. The city knew that they spent their time either in the house on the plain or in the house at Paternò, completely immersed in their private happiness. The Prince of Bronte, who lived in a dilapidated old villa two kilometres away from the Magnano property, claimed to have seen the newly weds, through the curtains of their room, with the aid of a

powerful telescope and that each time he had caught them in the act of kissing. This spicy bit of news aroused a great fluttering in the female dovecots; and as the March wind stirred the Venetian blinds, more than one woman thought of the sweet rustling of the corn on the plain and how marvellous it would be to nestle in Antonio's arms and watch the cornstalks undulating, through the windows of his balcony. Thus two years passed. Throughout that time, at the end of every month, Edoardo Lentini sent books to his friend: Freud, Einstein, Croce, Bergson, Mann, Ortega, Gide—all found their way to Piana and Paternò, but heaven alone knows if he read them.

'What are you sending him books for?' exclaimed Signor Alfio, meeting Edoardo on the Via Etnea. 'He's got no time for reading! He's my son; you can be damned sure that he's at it all day and all night!'

'Any sign of a child yet?' asked Edoardo.

'Not a sniff!' grunted the old man.

'That's queer,' observed Edoardo, 'but when you're too enthusiastic about it, children don't seem to come. It's my experience that it's the methodical kind of husband, who begets one child after another.'

'As a matter of fact I didn't have Antonio until I had been married four years. I waited for him as anxiously as if he had been the Messiah, the ugly little brute!'

'That I can't believe, that he was ugly!'

'Hairly as a monkey! . . . It's true that he made up for it later on.'

'It seems to me that he has made up for it only too well!'

The old boy turned his face upwards and sniffed, as was his custom when he wanted to hide his satisfaction;

he then fixed his walking-stick behind his back and walked off without another word. Suddenly he turned around and, brandishing his stick at Edoardo:

'But you,' he shouted at the top of his voice, 'will never be appointed Mayor of Catania, never in this world!'

Edoardo flushed to the roots of his hair and rushed back home in a state of violent nervous irritation.

'That old fool has jeopardised any chance I ever had!' he kept saying to himself as he paced up and down the halls and through the rooms. 'If a remark like that ever reaches Calderara's ears, which is infernally likely with all those spies patrolling the Corso, Christ returned to earth Himself couldn't get me the job!'

But he was to be spared this disappointment. One week later, Calderara was nominated Vice-Secretary-General of the party and moved to Rome, leaving in his place a certain Pietro Capano, a serious young man with a cropped head and pop-eyes that bulged like marbles; he thought of nothing but returning, respected and feared, to the lecture-hall of the college, where his father, his uncle and his brother had studied and where he had so often been asked the selfsame question: 'But are you all cretins in your family?'

When Calderara had settled down in Rome he went to pay his respects to Count K. The latter, to show that he was well informed about what was happening in Catania, mentioned Edoardo Lentini, whose name was fresh in his memory because he had recently re-read the letter which Antonio had sent him in 1935 and which his eldest son had used to wrap up a diamond which he had stolen from his mother. Calderara assumed from this that Count K. was favourably disposed towards

Lentini. Before he left he casually threw out the suggestion that Lentini be nominated Mayor of Catania. The count had no objections to put forward. So five days later Edoardo, returning home, found two workmen climbing his balcony carrying hammers and wires.

'The municipality is having a telephone installed in our house and paying the expenses,' explained his wife.

Edoardo did not dare to draw any rash conclusions and, shivering so much that he was obliged to wrap himself up in a shawl, waited for the wiring to be finished and the telephone to be connected up.

Scarcely had the workmen said, 'There, that job's done!' when the bell began to ring and, one after another, a hundred voices, from humble clerks right through the gamut up to exalted noblemen, congratulated the young man on his appointment as Mayor of Catania. It was 2nd January 1938.

Three months later, Antonio and Barbara returned to take up residence in Catania, in a wing of the Palazzo Puglisi. That same evening they were invited by Edoardo to watch a performance of *Norma* from the mayor's box. The eyes or the opera glasses of the whole house were on them. In the corridor, during the intermissions, Antonio was embraced by his friends.

'How do you manage,' they said to him, 'to become younger and thinner every day? When we got married we soon developed paunches like sacks of bran!'

'You know what that means,' remarked Luigi d'Agata slyly. 'It means that marriage is no rest cure for Antonio. Perhaps he's too active!'

'Poor cousin Barbara,' murmured Edoardo Lentini, so as not to be heard. 'With that great hulk of a fellow to cope with, I wonder if she ever sees daylight!'

Next day the visits from relatives and the invitations to dinner began.

Signor Alfio strutted along the Via Etnea between his son and daughter-in-law; he stopped in front of every café mirror pretending to admire the sugar lambs decorated with red ribbon, but really with the object of admiring Antonio, his daughter-in-law and himself, all in a row, just like a family portrait.

'They're in love with each other,' he said the same evening in his drawing-room to the relatives who were visiting him. 'It's quite simple, they're in love!'

'You don't have to make a great effort to love Antonio!' said an aunt in a black dress.

'You do and you don't!' retorted the old man, hoping to start off a fresh flow of complimentary remarks. 'My son must be stroked the right way or else he scratches like a cat.'

'Listen to me!' said his wife to him one evening when the guests had gone. 'All this fuss in my house is upsetting me. If we go on talking like this about our Antonio we'll have the whole city chattering about us. Something tells me that we're having our legs pulled.'

'You're dreaming!' answered the old man. 'The man has still to be born who will make a fool of me! But I admit that having all these people clumping about the house like mules, ruining our floors with their hobnail boots, isn't to my liking either!'

For some time the two old people kept all visitors away, but at the beginning of May they had to ask cousin Giuseppina in for coffee; a woman of fifty, nearly deaf, who gabbled without stopping for two solid hours; all the time the feather she wore on her head bobbed up and down, as if she were a trotting horse.

'Is it true that Barbara Puglisi is going to marry the Duke of Bronte?' she asked just as she was about to go.

'Are you stark staring mad?' shouted Signor Alfio. 'Barbara Puglisi is my daughter-in-law! . . .'

The old girl's only reply was to shake her wooden face from side to side, with a vacant expression and her mouth held half open.

'Antonio's wife! . . . My son's wife!' added Signor Alfio, shouting still louder.

'Precisely for that reason,' answered the old girl.

'What do you mean, precisely for that reason? Did you understand what I said to you?'

'I understood perfectly well what you said to me. And I answered: "Precisely for that reason."'

'But you must be off your head, then!'

'Believe me, Cousin Alfio, in our family I am the only one who has his or her head quite firmly and properly on its shoulders.'

'Possibly,' murmured the old man to his wife, controlling his temper with an enormous effort. 'You show her out, because if I come to the door, as sure as God's in His heaven, I'll chuck her down the stairs as if she were a bundle of dirty clothes. That's about what she is, anyhow! And tell her to groom herself with a curry-comb before she goes into other people's houses!'

Signora Rosaria went to the front door with her relative, kissed her perfunctorily and rejoined her husband.

'Good God alive!' he shouted. 'I tell her the facts in words of one syllable. I tell her that Barbara can't marry anyone, because she is already married, because she's my daughter-in-law, because she is the wife of Antonio and she answers me: "Precisely for that reason." And to cap it all she claims that I'm the one who is crazy!'

'But, Alfio,' protested his wife, 'you really are being stupid!'

'Why am I being stupid?'

'But how can you stand and reason with a madwoman who talks absolute nonsense?'

'Perhaps she merely wanted to be offensive.'

'How can it be offensive to say a thing which can't possibly be true, whether on earth or in heaven?'

'I don't know, but I have a feeling that she wanted to be insulting.'

'Come, Alfio, let's swallow the poison and forget about it, and go to bed!'

The two old people sat down in their dining-room and ate their salad in silence.

'Do you know what she really meant?' broke out Signor Alfio, lighting his pipe. 'That Barbara and Antonio aren't hitting it off well any more.'

'What a thing to say! Those two are together all day long. . . . He takes one step and she takes the next. . . . Why shouldn't they still be as happy as ever?'

'How do I know? But they can't keep their mouths shut in Catania because they have a lascivious itch every time they think of him. Do you know what they're saying? That your son is too much for his wife. That he's wearing her out!'

'What do they mean, wearing her out?'

'Come, come, by all the devils in hell, have I got to cross all the T's and dot all the I's for you? Your son is worse than a ram, and if a woman comes near him she is in danger.'

'Antonio as a husband isn't any different from any other husband!'

'You know that isn't true! To look at his face you'd

think that he was all made of sugar, like an angel, but underneath he's more like a stallion! . . . When he was living in Rome he had three or four mistresses at a time! If all the rivers are now running into one sea, I pity his poor wife—she has every right to be fed up! In any case, tomorrow I'm going to have a talk with the notary!

'All right, talk to anyone you like tomorrow, but now let's go to bed. And don't waste time looking under the beds! Thieves don't bother poor people like us. They know where to go.'

## CHAPTER FIVE

'... and thou wilt see,  
Things that will give the faith in my discourse.'

DANTE

'Stop the music, the bird has flown.'

F. LANZA

'But if you call woman, man and man, woman, yours  
must be a curious dialect.'

**Y**OU SEE, I was right after all! . . . It's just as I suspected!' shouted Signor Alfio, banging the telephone down on the desk and craning his head towards the hall. 'Come here a minute and I'll tell you! Rosaria. . . Aren't you there?'

Signora Rosaria appeared, breathless and red in the face from having taken down from the wall a large and heavy painting of Saint Agatha, which she was still holding in her arms.

'You're always carrying around some saint or other! Let them stop quietly where they are. . . Even they have their—ahem—on their minds! . . . You didn't hear, did you? I was right after all! That was Notary Puglisi on the telephone; he always talks with a cooing voice like an abbess, but he told me that he wanted to have a talk with me, that things aren't going at all well and that we shall have to do something about it at once!'

'Oh, the saints come to our aid! What did you say?'

'That I'll wait for him here and I asked him if he would mind stopping at a tobacconist on his way to buy me a couple of Toscani cigars, as my wife,' he added in a voice pregnant with disapproval, 'had forgotten to buy them for me this morning.'

'You would think of that at a time like this!'

'Am I supposed to go into mourning because your son acts like a crazy young cock? Now look what's happened! He has a fine time scratching himself while I have to catch his fleas for him! . . . Besides . . . that notary, with his oily voice, is trying to make a mountain out of a molehill! What does he want? Antonio to go elsewhere for what he's got in his own house? Keep a mistress? Seduce the maids? If his daughter is so much to my son's taste, let him mind his own business! Each man can bake his bread at home in any way the fancy takes him. What do you suppose they got married for: to sprinkle each other with salad water?'

'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost! Do you realise what you are saying?'

'What of it? Leave them alone! He knew that my son was a man with his full share of a man's legitimate appetites!'

'Be quiet! There's the bell! Blessed Mother of God, help us and save us!'

'Oh, Rosaria, don't irritate me! What are you frightened of?'

'I don't know, but things like this upset me dreadfully.'

At this moment a voice came from the hall.

'Signora, the notary!'

'Show him in, show him in at once!' cried the Signora anxiously. 'Are you making him wait in the hall? Why

stand on ceremony, my old friend? Come in! Our house is your house.' Signor Alfio rose ponderously from his chair.

'Have you brought my cigars?' he asked.

Without saying a word, as if it were beneath him to answer such a petty question, the notary walked slowly into the drawing-room; he wore a black frock coat with striped trousers and carried a black felt hat in his hand. He also wore an expression of the utmost gravity. The hair of his head and beard were in perfect order, just like the figures in a ledger; his two little eyes looked at everyone with the same fixed, unwinking, forbidding expression which compelled the dying to unseal their lips and discuss once more the things of this world.

The smile on Signora Rosaria's face was immediately expunged, and even Signor Alfio did not dare to ask again whether he had bought the cigars.

'You, Rosaria,' he mumbled, 'leave us alone for a while! Send in two cups of coffee, hot and strong, and go and put back that painting of Saint Agatha where you found it!'

Signora Rosaria picked up the painting, which was covered with dust, made a frightened little bow and hurried off along the hall, bending down every few steps to kiss the glass which covered the sacred image.

'Well,' said Signor Alfio. 'What's the trouble?'

The notary sat down in an armchair; he waited until his host had seated himself on the couch, the one with the high backrest loaded with pottery, statuary and knick-knacks; then he lowered his eyes and turned his hat round and round with his hands.

'The trouble is that our children's affairs are not going at all well!' he said very softly.

'My friend,' answered Signor Alfio immediately, 'to tell you the truth, I was going to telephone you today, myself, about the very same subject.'

'Is that so?' said the notary, getting up and staring him hard in the face.

'Yes. Because I, too . . . just lately . . . had heard say . . . You know that here in Catania nobody worries about being made a cuckold. . . . Everybody has the primal itch. . . . I had in fact heard that Barbara was unhappy.'

'It's impossible!' interrupted the notary curtly.

'What's impossible?'

'That my daughter should have breathed a word to anybody about so delicate a subject. You know the kind of upbringing she has had, her sensitive nature, her impeccable behaviour!'

'Come, come, notary! Nobody said anything about hearing a word of all this directly from Barbara. But . . . here in Catania that's the way we are . . . we have a language of the eyes . . . one gesture, one sigh is enough for everybody to suppose that they've understood. . . .'

'I hope your son hasn't been talking!'

'Now you're making a mistake, my dear notary! You don't know Antonio; you don't really know him, and you don't realise what a treasure you have for a son-in-law!'

'I yield to no one in my admiration for your son's goodness, his delicacy of feeling and his intelligence . . . but, unfortunately, in married life, as you perhaps know better than I, there are other things which are even more important. . . .'

'Oh, come, notary! They are important, of course, but not so important as all that! We mustn't exaggerate! . . .

There'd be the devil to pay! . . . And, above all, if you want my opinion, in these matters parents have no more right to meddle than Pilate in the Credo!

'What are you driving at?'

'I repeat, it's no business of ours and, as parents, it is our duty not to pry and meddle!'

'That's all very well, but that applies only up to a certain point.'

'Naturally, only up to a certain point. If things were to become really serious, if he were to overstep the mark, then, yes, you or I, that is to say, between us we could make Antonio understand that . . . well . . .'

'In situations like this, my dear Signor Alfio, words can't be of much use.'

'Why not, my dear notary? We are not animals; we are all baptised and confirmed Christians; we are supposed to be civilised! If Barbara is unhappy, surely he will be the first one to take steps about it.'

'Barbara's unhappiness is mental, or rather moral, not physical.'

'I don't follow you at all. Surely it's not insulting, to any wife, that a husband . . . well, how shall I put it? . . . is too ardent.'

There was a pause. The notary seemed depressed; he frowned and stared straight at his host.

'What's that you said?' he murmured.

'I said,' repeated Signor Alfio, somewhat impatiently, 'that it can't be considered an insult to a wife if the husband shows that he desires her too much or too often!'

'But it's not a question of that!' said the notary.

There was another pause.

'What? What did you say?' stammered Signor Alfio.

'That there was no question of just that.'

‘Then what is it a question of?’

‘Oh, I was under the impression that you suspected, had some inkling of the facts. I see now that you have no idea at all of what is happening, what the real trouble is between our children. I assure you that this makes it very difficult, and very painful, for me to give you an explanation.’

‘Please, notary, out with it! Don’t keep me on tenter-hooks! What’s the matter? Is it that my son is ill?’

‘It couldn’t be said that he is definitely unwell, but . . . his condition . . .’

‘But what’s the matter with him? What’s the matter with him?’ asked the old man, trying to conceal his anxiety by simulating anger. ‘What is the matter with him? You’re killing me! What’s the matter with him?’

‘Don’t upset yourself; be calm, I beg of you! There is no question of any threat to his health.’

‘Rosaria,’ shouted Signor Alfio, ‘send me a glass of water!’

‘Keep calm!’ repeated the notary. ‘Keep calm! I assure you that there is absolutely nothing wrong with Antonio’s health; it is only that . . .’

Signora Rosaria came in at that moment, bringing the glass of water herself in the hope of deriving some comfort from their expressions. Instead of which she found the notary looking as tight as a screw, and her husband’s face half red and half yellow, with one eye bulging in so ferocious a squint that it almost seemed to dangle like a loose button.

‘Holy Virgin, what’s the matter?’ she cried.

‘Hold your tongue!’ retorted her husband. ‘Hold your tongue! Put the glass down on that table and be off with you!’

'Notary,' said Signor Alfio, after drinking his water and rolling his tongue around his mouth; it felt to him as if it were covered with poison. 'Let's get down to facts; I'm not interested in riddles! What exactly has happened?'

'The facts are that my daughter, after three years of marriage, is precisely and exactly as she was when she left my house.'

Old Signor Alfio stammered: 'What? Who?' but very quietly, because he had not understood a word; he looked at the notary for a long time with a tranquil and sleepy stare; he was too confused and his thoughts were wandering too much to allow him to understand.

The notary sighed; he had been at great pains to make his words unmistakably clear, but it was now obvious that they had made no impression on Signor Alfio; the two men continued to gaze at each other, the one sadly, the other calmly.

But all of a sudden Signor Alfio's eyes flashed fire, as if something had exploded in his brain.

'No!' he shouted. 'What the devil are you talking about? No, No!'

'I am sorry, my dear friend, but, unfortunately for us both, what I have told you is the literal truth!'

'No, never!' added Signor Alfio with a bitter laugh. 'Not in this world! Not even in the world of dreams! I wouldn't believe it if I saw it with my own eyes! Impossible! . . . Absolutely impossible!' He got up from his chair, laughing loudly, but with the pained expression of a man who is choking for lack of air and gets up to breathe more freely. 'Ah, ah, ah! . . . How could you be such a fool as to believe a wild story like that? Who told you?'

'Well, certainly not my daughter! If it depended on her, things could have continued, without change, until they both died. Barbara began her married life as ignorant as a baby. For three years she thought that her husband was behaving just like all other husbands. Your son, I beg your pardon for saying it, took advantage of his wife's innocence. In fact, if you want to know what I really think, Antonio has shown that he treats his responsibilities with a most reprehensible levity.'

'Now, notary, be a bit more careful how you choose your words!'

'I repeat: reprehensible irresponsibility, yes, because a young man should not embark on matrimony when he knows he's not capable of . . .'

'Notary, notary! I just can't believe it! Antonio of all people! . . . As the Lord looks down on us from heaven, don't let me say too much!'

'You've already said too much! It's my turn to speak! I tell you that if Antonio was irresponsible, you were more so, because a father should not allow his son to marry when he knows about his infirmity.'

'What infirmity? What infirmity, notary? Is it an infirmity to have innumerable women in Catania, even more women in Rome and making love to them with such enthusiasm that you could see sparks coming out of their eyes? Is that what you call an infirmity?'

There was a pause during which the notary twisted his trim little beard.

'Listen, dear friend,' he said in a voice as calm as his cheeks were pale. 'We must not talk to each other like this! We're talking at cross purposes and we shall never get ourselves straightened out at this rate. We are two poor fathers, both equally involved in this unfortunate

affair. Do you suppose that it's a matter of indifference to me that in all probability my own daughter's, my Barbara's most intimate secrets will soon be a matter of common gossip? No, dear Signor Alfio, you may think me callous, I have to keep up appearances when I am with you, but if you were to see me when I am alone in my bedroom you would see me weeping like a baby.'

At this Signor Alfio himself burst into tears, sobbing quietly as if his heart were breaking. After a while he calmed down and wiped his eyes.

'How can I possibly believe what you tell me? I know Antonio. He's been a passionate woman-chaser ever since he was a boy of twelve. Why, at this particular juncture . . . with his wife . . . with a woman like Barbara who's attractive enough to make a blind man see . . . why, why? . . .'

'I have no idea of the reason. But I assure you that the situation between our two children has become humiliating for both of them and cannot be allowed to continue!'

'What do you advise me to do?'

The notary raised his hands in a gesture of despair.

'Above all,' Signor Alfio hastened to add, 'we must keep this to ourselves, and no one—I repeat, not a soul, not even my wife, not even your wife, not even Jesus Christ who is listening to us—must know about it!'

'How can we possibly manage that?' The notary shook his head.

'Why not. You don't seem like yourself today! All that we have to do is to keep our mouths shut and not breathe a word to a soul!'

'And then?'

'And then, later on, we'll see how things are shaping. . . . I'll talk to Antonio. . . . It's my solemn duty to

‘speak to my son! . . . I know you to be a man of the greatest probity, but who knows? You may have misunderstood!’

The notary smiled bitterly.

‘But you agree that the first thing to do is for me to talk to Antonio?’

‘Certainly. You are free to defend the interests of your son, in the manner which seems best to you, as I am to defend those of my daughter! They would be identical if Antonio and Barbara were really and truly husband and wife, but this way . . .’

‘What do you mean by this way? Weren’t they properly married with all the blessings of the Church?’

‘You should know, dear Signor Alfio, that a marriage in these circumstances is just as if it had never been contracted . . . it is null and void!’

‘And who is to say that it is null and void? You, just because today you get some idea into your head?’

‘It is not I who say it, it is the Church.’

‘What Church, what Church? When did the Church say so?’

‘It hasn’t said so yet, but it will say it.’

‘Notary, you’re talking in riddles. Let’s be open about it! What idea have you got in the back of your head?’

‘Listen, Signor Alfio. If that’s the attitude you’re going to take up, I have nothing further to say. I shall simply leave you.’

‘Well, go, get out!’ shouted Signor Alfio, beside himself with rage. ‘Go away at once!’

The notary got up, drew himself up to his full height and looked more forbidding than ever; but Signor Alfio did not even look at him.

‘And let me tell you, Notary! I don’t believe a single

word of what you have been telling me! I shall talk to my son and find out the truth.'

'Very well then!' said the notary. 'You talk to your son! Meanwhile I shall take care of my daughter's interests. Good day. My respects to the signora.'

As he opened the door he saw Signora Rosaria, deathly pale, leaning against the wall. He bowed deeply to her and went off down the dark corridor.

'Rosaria!' shouted Signor Alfio, pulling her into the room. 'Did you hear? Did you hear what that devil said?'

'Yes,' said his wife, trembling and almost fainting.

The old man made her sit on the couch, gave her some water to drink, tenderly stroked her cheeks and started pacing up and down the room.

'Liar! Dirty liar!' he exclaimed.

'Don't talk like that, Alfio!'

'Let me talk, let me get it off my chest! He comes to tell me that my son . . . that Antonio . . . isn't capable? . . . isn't capable of what, my son? . . . not capable. . . . It must be a joke, a stupid joke! . . . Here in Sicily everybody does it; they're at it all the time! Even I, in my present state, old as I am and with diabetes to boot, I feel so full of beans that I could . . .'

'Alfietto, Alfietto, stop! You mustn't talk like that!'

'But just think of it, think of it! The very idea makes me go completely off my head!'

'Alfio, listen to me! There's something fishy about all this. When our cousin suddenly asked that question, I felt my heart sinking into my boots.'

'Cousin? Which cousin? . . . What question?'

'Don't you remember, Alfio, that deaf old Giuseppina? She stood just where you are standing now and said, "Is

it true that Barbara Puglisi is going to marry the Duke of Bronte?"

Signor Alfio clapped his hand to his forehead. 'You're right, by God, you're right! That ~~s~~ake knew. . . . She wouldn't put her nose out of her own pigsty except to come and gloat over other people's misfortunes! But that means the whole thing's already public property!'

He swayed and fell into a chair. This time it was the wife's turn to hold his head and press it tenderly to her breast.

'But, Alfio, we're wasting time; we're standing here worrying ourselves to death instead of doing the one thing that is important!'

'What's that?'

'Why, Alfio dear, talk to Antonio, of course.'

'That's right, of course! . . . I'll phone to him at once. What's his number?'

'You know it, Alfietto: 17420!'

He went over to the telephone and began fumbling with the dial.

'I can't see the numbers!' he shouted. 'Give me my spectacles!'

'But, Alfio, you've got them on!'

'But I can't see just the same! You dial the damned number!'

The signora walked heavily over to the desk, lifted the spectacles off her husband's nose and put them on her own; she tried to dial, but burst out crying.

'I can't see either! They've robbed us of ten years of our lives, those heartless people!'

'Let's call the maid,' said Signor Alfio. 'But we must dry our eyes first! We mustn't give ourselves away!'

'Give me your handkerchief, Alfio!'

'Here it is! . . . Dry them properly! . . . There, on your nose! Even your blouse is wet.'

The signora then called for Rosina, who appeared with her hands red and dripping; she was half-illiterate and it was a long time before she managed to pick out the numbers in proper sequence.

As soon as he heard the sound of ringing at the other end, Signor Alfio snatched the receiver from her and sent her packing.

It was Antonio himself who answered.

'Who's speaking? Is that you, Papa?'

When he heard his son speaking in his usual, quiet tones, the old man put his hands over the receiver and sobbed uncontrollably for a few seconds.

'What's the matter?' his son asked and his voice now sounded surprised.

'Well, my dear boy, have you any news for me?'

'No, nothing that I can think of.'

'Really nothing, nothing at all?'

'Papa, I don't understand. What are you talking about?'

The old man waved his left arm triumphantly in the air to show his wife that he was delighted at what Antonio was saying.

'Think hard, Antonio; haven't you anything at all to say to me?'

'I still don't understand. Should I have something to say to you?'

'Well then,' said Signor Alfio in a loud and emphatic voice, 'your father-in-law is an unmitigated rascal!'

There was a short pause.

'Why do you say that?' said Antonio in a voice which sounded a trifle disconcerted.

‘Did you know that he was here this morning?’

‘At your house?’

‘Yes, here, and his conversation was scarcely edifying. He talked a whole lot of rubbish; you ought to have heard him! . . . Are you alone? Can anyone hear you?’

‘Yes, I’m quite alone; go ahead!’ said Antonio in a faint voice.

‘How can I tell you? The things that man told me burn my lips! . . . He’s as mad as a hatter, my son! You’d better put him in a strait-jacket when he gets home! And shut him up, because every word he says will push us deeper into the mire! . . . Do you know what he had the nerve to say to me, here in this room, that’s why I couldn’t make him swallow his own goatee because he was in my house? . . . He said to me: “Barbara . . .” It makes me sick to repeat it! . . . “Barbara, after three years of marriage, is precisely and exactly as she was when she left . . .”’

There was a click. Antonio had replaced the receiver.

## CHAPTER SIX

'My heart tells me that you are a tyrant, that you forget me and  
no longer love me.'

SICILIAN SONG

'Oh, that thrice accursed night . . .'

SHAKESPEARE

'When a man has played the fool he had better keep his mouth  
shut and not talk about it.'

G. VERGA

ANTONIO HAD TURNED white as a shroud, his teeth chattered and rivulets of cold sweat ran down his flanks and his chest; the lower part of his body felt congested and heavy, while the upper part, including his head, felt bloodless, almost empty; thoughts flew through his brain, like autumn leaves pursued by the wind; he was terrified that his shameful secret was discovered after so many years of scheming and dissembling; at the same time he was curiously comforted and relieved; almost a sensation of delight in the truth, as if he were a woman who had been to confession!

His first impulse was to slip away at any cost and hide in some cottage in the country or even between two stones like a lizard; but servants' voices, the sound of his uncle the priest's sandals and the striking of the courthouse clock pulled him up short; they made him realise, in some obscure way, that his troubles were only beginning and that it would be wiser to delay his flight.

He left the house immediately, without even seeing his wife, hurried along the Via Etnea, which was saturated by sunshine, and went straight to his father-in-law's office. He pushed the heavy curtains aside and entered the office which was on the ground floor. At first he saw nothing, as he was still blinded by the dazzling light out of doors.

The notary, however, saw him clearly outlined against the light that streamed through the curtains; he was sitting behind a counter, pen in hand and pencil behind the ear, surrounded by peasants in their best velvet suits.

'Excuse me just a moment!' he said to the peasants, who stood resting their big, stubby fingers on the edge of the desk. 'I must see this gentleman for a minute!'

He took Antonio by the arm, gingerly, as if he expected him to explode like a firecracker, and led him to a back-room, across a small corridor with a low ceiling which was filled with old files, permeated with the odour of bergamot.

The back-room was spacious and lofty; dozens of chairs were stacked against the walls; the upturned, curved legs of the chairs framed the portraits of all the Puglisi notaries who had presided over the office in the course of two centuries; a single small round window reflected the bright May sunshine.

Antonio put his hand to his forehead; he felt as if his face were completely drained of blood, while the faces of all those notaries looking down at him through the chair-legs seemed to run together and come to a focus in his father-in-law's face.

He was quite incapable of speaking; he stared at his father-in-law's thin, straight lips, which were also tightly shut.

'My son,' said the notary at last, after having withstood for a long time the appeal of those two moist, ardent, questioning and desperate eyes. 'I hope that you understand the real motive of my visit to your father. No other course was open to me!'

'But why?' asked Antonio. 'Why?'

He glanced uncomfortably over his shoulder, as if he was looking for something.

The notary hurriedly pulled a stool from the middle of a pile of chairs and set it behind Antonio's buckling knees; the young man very slowly sank down, still asking yet again: 'Why?'

'Antonio, be a man!' said the notary and immediately flushed, as if, involuntarily, he had used a word which might sound ironical.

Antonio noticed the flush; he was only too quick to detect the subtlest shades of meaning behind any reference to his secret and felt himself going paler still, if that were possible.

'Be a man!' repeated the notary, deciding that the only way not to offend Antonio was to consider the first remark inoffensive. 'You must face your problems with courage! It has been a great misfortune, but what can you do? The world is full of misfortunes, and this is far from being the worst of them!'

'But what misfortune?' murmured Antonio. 'I don't understand!'

'No, no, no, no! You'd better not try that way out, Antonio! You're relying on the fact that your wife is worth her weight in gold and would rather die than talk about a thing like this! But that's not generous of you! You mustn't count too much on that, eh, eh!'

'But what is it that Barbara can't talk about?'

The notary was incensed: 'Antonio, Antonio! Do I have to ask *you* about what Barbara can't talk about? It's about time that you saw fit to understand me, Antonio, isn't it?'

'No, I don't understand! . . . I am waiting for you to explain!'

'Will it be enough for you,' said the notary slowly and distinctly, 'if I give you one name?'

'What name?'

'Giovanna.'

'Giovanna? What Giovanna?' repeated the young man, obviously puzzled.

'In November of last year you dismissed a maid. Her name was Giovanna. . . .'

'And so . . .?'

'And so . . . nothing, of course! But bless our Lord's wounds! Are you trying to crucify me as they did Christ? . . . Don't be a stupid idiot! . . . Giovanna talked, of course! As soon as you dismissed her she ran straight to my wife . . . and talked! I must request you not to ask me what she said!'

Antonio pressed his hand hard against the corner of his mouth to stop it twitching.

'I'm sorry; I'd still very much like to know what all this is about.'

The notary reached in his pocket for his massive gold cigarette-case, opened it, selected a cigarette and closed it; he was seething inwardly and he felt like smashing the case; his gestures revealed the difficulty with which he restrained himself. He lit the cigarette and stared at the floor as he began to smoke. Then he raised his eyes and looked intently at Antonio.

'One day,' he said at last, 'Barbara felt a little dizzy for

a moment and the maid asked her if she was pregnant. "I think I am," answered Barbara. The maid had had five children of her own; so she tried to work out the expected date; in so doing she asked Barbara a number of very pertinent questions. In this way she learnt that Barbara was under the impression, which *you* had given her, that babies are born as the result of fraternal and chaste embraces which, after midnight . . .'

"That's enough, that's enough!" shouted Antonio, jumping to his feet.

The notary threw his cigarette away and stamped on it with great violence.

'My God!' he bawled. 'It certainly is enough! . . . It should be enough! . . . But it may not be! It was you who persuaded me to . . .'

'I didn't want to hear any of this! But in any case, instead of telling my father, why didn't you tell me first? It might have been possible . . .'

'What might have been possible? What do you suppose that we could have done? I am much older than you are and I know about this sort of thing. . . . I know that when relations between man and wife get to this point there's nothing for it but a clean break, a nice clean break and at once, without any shilly-shallying!'

The young man closed his eyes and leaned his forehead on the palm of his hand, pushing up his magnificent eyebrows and displaying the delicate transparency of his eyelids. Then he looked up.

'At once, you say! Six months have gone by since November! Why did you wait so long, if you knew then?'

For the first time the notary's face showed a trace of embarrassment.

'That's quite true! Six months *have* gone by. . . .But we had to be sure first . . . talk to Barbara. . . .'

'What! For six months you've been discussing this with Barbara behind my back?'

'Just a moment, please. Discussing this with Barbara is not the right way of putting it. Far from there being any discussion, we had the greatest difficulty in persuading her to talk to us at all and then we had to try and convince her . . .'

'Convince her of what?'

'Convince her to consider herself what she really is: a young woman who has never been married at all!'

'No! You want to make an open scandal! Do you really want the story to be on everyone's lips that . . . that . . . I . . . that . . . she . . . ?' Antonio's voice rose to a shout.

'Heaven preserve us from such a thing!'

'No, I beg of you, I beseech you! Think it over first. . . . Surely you can't realise what the consequences would be?'

'And what about the present? Do you, can you, or anyone else consider the present state of affairs pleasant or desirable?'

'The person to decide that is Barbara, not you nor I!'

'Barbara is a sensible girl. I trust her judgment.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Nothing, only that she's got her head screwed on the right way and won't have any difficulty in deciding!'

'Does Barbara know that you were going to have a talk with me today?'

'Antonio, you came here of your own initiative!'

'But does Barbara know that you talked to my father today?'

'I don't think that she knows it!'

‘Does she know or doesn’t she?’

At this point Antonio realised that he was up against a brick wall of resistance. Just for a second he hesitated, then he brushed his father-in-law aside and, without a word of farewell, walked out into the hall. He passed through the office, which was buzzing with animated conversation, and found himself in the street.

He had to talk to Barbara! At once! Without losing a minute.

He hurried back through the Via Etnea, cannoning into the passers-by, turned into the Piazza Stesicoro, opened the front door of the Puglisi house with his latch-key and galloped up the stairs, making as much clatter as if he were tumbling down them instead.

He found Barbara in the bedroom, sitting in an arm-chair with a piece of crochet-work on her lap. As soon as he saw her he felt the full bitterness of his position, for she made him think of a young wife in the act of preparing her baby’s layette.

He was appalled by the implications of this idea; he felt that he was being bombarded from all sides by derisive allusions and looked for help from some supernatural sources; he raised his eyes to the wall on which a painting of the Madonna was hanging. But here again a similarly ironical thought struck him. The Madonna had had her son without having recourse to that act. . . .

He sat down on the floor, at his wife’s feet.

‘Barbara! . . . Darling Barbara!’

He squeezed her beautiful hand, experiencing, as always, the most intense of emotions, compounded of desperate longing and an imaginative representation of the keenest joy; in fact he long imagined the most

unutterable passion ripened by such delight as no man has yet actually experienced.

His wife blushed; a surge of red flowed into her cheeks and spread, in ever-widening circles, up to her forehead, under her hair and behind her ears.

‘Barbara, why are you blushing like that?’

‘I’m sorry, but I can’t help it!’

He looked up at her, enchanted by the extraordinary beauty of the scarlet glow, which reminded him of scarlet Japanese lanterns on a Sicilian summer night, and was dismayed at the thoughts he imagined her to be harbouring underneath that glowing mask.

Abruptly he fell on his knees and caught his wife in his arms.

‘Barbara, something very serious happened this morning! Do you know about it?’

Her flush receded, as if her life blood was ebbing away with it and she nodded her head in assent.

‘Yes? Do you mean yes? Do you know that your father went to call on mine this morning?’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘When did you hear it?’

‘They told me, as soon as he arrived back home!’

‘Is that possible? How could your father have taken such a serious step without consulting you first?’

She feverishly picked up the crochet-work which had slipped off the hook and made no answer.

‘Barbara, Barbara, tell me the truth. Do you approve of what your father did? Answer me: do you approve?’

She kept silent and gave him a long searching look. Antonio rose to his feet. His wife’s incredible silence struck him with the force of a physical blow; he covered his eyes with his hands.

'My God, my God, I feel so ashamed! My God, my God, I feel unutterably ashamed!' he murmured.

His wife went on picking up stitches without speaking; the only sign of emotion was an almost imperceptible tremor of the lips.

'But, Barbara, why, after three years of marriage, all of a sudden, without any special reason, have you and your parents decided? . . .

'You're being unfair, Antonio! You know that it was only last November that I found out from that woman. . . .'

She bent her head so far forward that locks of hair fell in front of her face, which began to flush up again.

'Perhaps you're right! But afterwards didn't we swear to live together and love each other just as much, in fact more than ever? . . . How many times have you told me that you were happier like this than you would have been the other way? That God blessed our home where no . . .'

'But now I have found out that the Church does not give us its blessing!'

'For what reason? We are not doing any harm to anyone, are we?'

'We may not be doing any harm, but our marriage does not exist in the sight of God!'

'Since when have you known that our marriage does not exist before God?'

'I have known it for some time!'

'Since when, since when? I want to know exactly?'

Barbara hesitated for a second and then said: 'Since the archbishop explained it all to me!'

'Do you mean that you have discussed our private affairs with the archbishop as well? . . . But then everybody will know about it; you might as well have thrown

me to the wolves! . . . And all this time I was living with you and trusting you; you seemed so happy and were treating me with such tenderness. As soon as I turned my back, you started chattering to priests and arch-bishops! . . .'

'I only went just seven days ago!'

'But how did it happen at all? and why? Did anything new happen seven days ago?'

'I don't know what happened seven days ago! But, dear Antonio, I have my duties as a daughter as well as a wife; and I had to obey my father!'

'So it was your father who made you go to the arch-bishop seven days ago?'

'Yes!'

'And how is it that this eminently respectable man started to concern himself with our relationship only a week ago? He's known ever since November. . . .'

'Antonio, are you blaming him for what he's done or for doing it so late?'

'I'm not blaming him, but no one can convince me that he hasn't some secret plans for you!'

'I know nothing about my father's plans for me, but that whatever they are they are noble ones and spring from his great affection for me. My father is a good man, a man who goes to confession and mass much more often than you do, Antonio, and my duty is to obey him.'

'Barbara, look me in the eyes! . . . Are you telling me the truth?'

'I don't know what you mean,' she said, and her face grew pale again. Her expression became haughty, severe and utterly blank. It was because of this Puglisi expression that the family were feared more when they were silent than when they spoke.

'Barbara, where has it gone, all the love you had for me?'

'I am just as fond of you as ever, but it is no longer the same as the love of a wife for her real husband!'

'Why?'

'Because we aren't husband and wife any more!'

'Since when?'

'Oh, Antonio, we have never been. . . . But I didn't know it. Now I do.'

'Is that why you can't love me any more?'

'I do love you, I do love you; how can I explain it to you? I love you! But not as a wife loves her husband. It is another kind of love.'

'I don't know what kind of love it is, but I do know that no one could hurt me more than you are hurting me now!'

'Nothing could be more wicked, Antonio, than for a man and woman, who are not really married, to go on living together! . . . But haven't you noticed that ever since they explained the whole thing to me I can't stand anywhere near you without getting as red as a beetroot?'

'But there isn't any harm in our being near to each other!'

'There's no harm, but it has a terrible effect on me!'

'We could have separate beds, we could even live in separate rooms!'

She shook her head.

'I'll go away, if you want me to. I'll pretend that I'm going on a journey and I won't come back. . . . I'll go and get a job in Africa. . . . I'll stay there for the rest of my life!'

'Wouldn't that be worse for us, Antonio?'

'No, it wouldn't be worse! Nothing could be worse than what you are getting ready to do to me! . . . Listen to me! . . . We could go to America and get a divorce!'

'No! . . . I am a practising and believing Catholic! I would never consider the idea of a divorce, not even if you had murdered our child!' She bit her lip and flushed, realising that she had been careless and stupid enough to use one of the five or six words she had sworn never to say in front of her husband. 'Darling, ask me anything you like, but not something which my conscience tells me is sinful!'

'But if our marriage is considered null and void by the Church, very well, let us consider it so ourselves! I'll go and live somewhere far away from here . . . we won't live together, we won't see each other, or we'll meet as strangers, very occasionally. . . . That's by far the best solution!'

'No! You know as well as I do, that that won't do!'

'Isn't that enough for you? What more do you want?'

'We must confess our error to the Church, so that it can be absolved!'

'Absolved? How?'

'By the annulment of a marriage that you entered into, practically under false pretences,' said his mother-in-law, through the curtains of the dressing-room.

Signora Agatina appeared dressed in feathers, furs, tassels and veils; there was a rustle of silk against her ample knees and armpits.

Antonio jumped to his feet and took several steps backward, giving a bewildered glance at the other two doors, as if he expected to see still more people suddenly appear through them.

'Were you listening?'

'I wasn't listening on purpose, but I went into the dressing-room to get a hand mirror and I heard! . . . I couldn't help hearing!'

'You shouldn't have listened, Mama. It was very wrong of you!' said Barbara, bursting into tears.

For a few moments no one spoke. Signora Agatina watched Barbara out of the corner of her eye as she turned her expressive face to Antonio, so that he might see what she was thinking. Barbara threw the crochet-work and the hook on to the bed and, with her head averted, ran from the room, still sobbing.

'It can't go on like this, surely you can see that?' said Signora Agatina grimly.

Antonio did not answer, for he was incapable of any sort of response. He felt utterly drained of all vitality, but his weakness seemed to him almost a kind of protective cloak. Reflected in the round mirror of the dressing-table and in the long mirror of the wardrobe, his face was suffused with subtle thoughts; his lips seemed to be about to utter those eloquent words which it is only given to the choicest spirits among men to pronounce and that only once in a whole lifetime.

Signora Agatina could not refrain from seizing his hand and pressing it to her breast.

'Dearest boy, you mustn't be discouraged! You're still so young!'

And feeling more and more drawn to him, she wound her fur-clad arms around his body and hugged him, almost convulsively, resting her cheek on his.

'My dear one! My dear Antonio!'

'But . . . but . . .'

'What do you want to say? You needn't be bashful with me, dear; you can talk freely! I am not a young

woman . . . I have lived a full life ! You can say anything you like to me ; there is no fear of my misunderstanding you !' Whereupon she hugged him even closer to her.

'But I would only like to know . . .'

'Come, tell me ; what would you like to know ?'

Signora Agatina's voice was very soft and her lips very close to his.

'I would like to know why the notary pretended not to know about there being anything wrong for seven months, and then all of a sudden, without consulting me to find out my point of view . . . decides to convince Barbara, makes her discuss the matter with the archbishop, and then goes to my poor old father . . .'

'Eh, Antonio, my Antonio, you must try to understand !'

'But what am I to understand ? I am ready to go down on my knees to her father and to Barbara . . . if I have involuntarily offended them !'

'No, my dearest Antonio, it is not a question of that ! Why should a young man like you get on his knees to anyone ? You shouldn't get on your knees to anyone, my dear Antonio. You're as beautiful as the sun ! . . . It was just not the will of God with Barbara, that's all ! Be patient ! It means that it was written in heaven that you should marry some other woman ! Heaven knows its own will, and when a marriage is not written in the heavenly book, we poor mortals are foolish enough to want to write our names down together in the parish book. . . . But it's just a paper marriage ! . . . Patience, my love ! You are young ! Life is just beginning for both of you ! I'm sure that you'll find your true wife, the one the Lord has destined for you, and Barbara, poor chick, she, too. . . . You wouldn't want her to be an old maid !

. . . She has her rights, too! . . . It will be a good thing if she finds the husband the Lord has chosen for her!’

The conversation was proceeding in such a faint and hushed tone of voice that one rustle of the signora’s dress was enough to cover her last words.

‘Will Barbara marry soon and who will it be?’

‘Do you know who’s in love with her, so madly in love that he would gladly have himself torn to pieces for her and even give up his millions? The Duke of Bronte!’

‘Ah, the Duke of Bronte? Is that who it is? But isn’t he already married?’

‘No, it’s his brother, the prince, who is married, not the duke!’

‘I thought that only the eldest brother was allowed to marry in that family!’

‘Yes, but in this case the eldest brother has no children. That is the reason they want the other one to marry.’

‘Oh, the Duke of Bronte! But he’s so fat . . . At least, so it seems to me! Or am I mistaken?’

‘He went to Paris for a reducing cure! It cost him a million lire! . . . And you, my love, who would you marry, if you had to choose someone?’

‘Oh, me? Not again, no fear!’

‘Do you mean nobody? Why? The same misfortune doesn’t happen twice!’

‘No, nobody; I mean nobody!’

‘But why, my handsome love?’

‘Nobody, nobody!’

His voice had faded to a harsh whisper, the sort which overwrought relatives imagine they hear issuing from a grave; his face became so pale that it was almost luminous. Antonio closed his eyes and fainted.

‘Caterina! Graziella!’ screamed his mother-in-law, feeling the young man go limp in her arms. ‘Graziella! Caterina! Come here! Hurry, hurry!’

She dragged Antonio to the bed and just managed to lift him on to it. She straightened up very suddenly with the feeling (or had she been dreaming?) that she had given him a number of very unmaternal kisses on the mouth.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

‘And canst thou read the thoughts which churn in yonder head?’

SICILIAN PROVERB

‘The deeper I go digging  
in the depths of your heart  
the more loath am I to place my faith in you,  
and become regardless of your outward seeming. . . .’

T. TASSO

‘Similar to this new woman  
who stands as frigid as the snow in shade  
which nothing moves no more than stone  
not even summer weather. . . .’

DANTE

WHEN ANTONIO RECOVERED, the idea of living in his father-in-law’s house had become so repellent to him that he took refuge in his parents’ house in the Via Pacini. Here he shut himself into his room. For the first three days he would not open the door to anyone, except his mother. She came and sat silently by the head of the bed, watching him sleep with the gentlest of smiles on her face.

After three days, he began to venture into most of the corridors and rooms; as he was particularly averse to seeing the maid, he was often preceded, in these excursions, by a shout from Signor Alfio, in a grumbling bass, and a cry from Signora Rosaria, in a more tuneful alto: ‘Lock yourself into the lavatory, Rosina! I’ll tell you when you can come out! . . .’ He was willing to see his father, but only if his mother were there, too; he was careful to keep well away from the windows of the balcony for fear of

being seen by the neighbours; he especially dreaded the eagle eye of the Ardizzone spinster, whose head he imagined stuck on the outer wall of the house opposite like the image of a harpy; after dark he insisted on his mother closing the shutters before he would switch on the light. Before opening a door he now took the precaution of rattling the handle; he did so because on several occasions, when passing silently in his slippers from room to room, he had surprised his father in the act of pounding his temples or his mother pressing a handkerchief to her lips, using it as a receptacle to catch the sighs which she was unable to stifle.

All his friends were told that Antonio was suffering from the measles, a disease known to be serious for an adult and dangerous to Barbara and her parents, who had escaped it during their childhood; this was the reason given for his having been carried to his father's house and for his not being allowed to see any visitors until he was completely recovered. This story was even told to Edoardo, who sent a municipal guard every morning with a basket of fresh fish.

'You,' said Signor Alfio to Notary Puglisi, 'must promise me, if you love your daughter, that neither you nor any member of your family will allow so much as a hint of what has happened to leak out for at least two weeks!'

'You have my word!'

'Don't forget, notary, that the ox is judged by his horns and man by his word!'

'The Puglisi have always been gentlemen and respect their obligations! You can count on our not even going to confession for two weeks and our mouths will not know what our hearts suffer!'

The two weeks were drawing to an end and Signor

Alfio had not yet been able to pluck up sufficient courage to have a heart-to-heart talk with his son.

He walked up and down outside the door of Antonio's room; he sometimes got as far as putting his hand on the door, but when it came to knocking, he stood with his knuckles in the air, waiting for his wife to find him.

'Alfio, what are you doing?' she cried. 'Leave the boy alone! Can't you see that he's grown as thin as a skeleton?' If his wife failed to appear, he slowly lowered his clenched fist and went back to his pacing.

But just before the two weeks were up, he worked himself into a state of desperation and, opening the door abruptly, hurled himself into Antonio's room.

'I only want to ask you one question!' he shouted, approaching the subject with as much finesse as a bull at a hedge. 'When Barbara is in bed is she made like every other woman or has she some physical defect?'

'But what defect should she have, Alfietto? We women are all made exactly the same!' said Signora Rosaria in an ingratiating voice. She had followed her husband into the room and now carefully shut the door.

'Will you be quiet! Let me talk to my son!'

He pushed his wife out of the room, following her half-way down the corridor to make sure that she was really going away. He then went back, closed and locked the door.

Antonio had been lying down on his bed. On seeing his father, he had jumped up and was now leaning his forehead against the window, after carefully drawing the curtains.

'Well?'

'No, Papa, as far as I know Barbara has nothing in the way of a physical defect!'

'Well then, why? . . . I think I'm going mad!'

Antonio said nothing.

'Did you do it on purpose? Did you deliberately not want to? . . .'

Silence. The back of Antonio's neck, which looked like wax below his long and beautiful hair, was as motionless as if he were asleep; but a drop of blood had fallen on the curtain from his lower lip.

'Yes,' he groaned, 'I did it on purpose!'

'That's all I want to know! Don't say another word! I don't want to know anything else! That's enough for me. . . . Oh God, I thank thee! . . . That's enough! That's enough! That's all I want to know!'

Antonio had turned his head, regretting his words and wanting to retract them, but his father was already out of the room waving his hands in the air in a state of great excitement.

'Ah, by the Virgin!' he bawled. 'I knew it! . . . It was he who didn't want to. . . . I expect that he had his own reasons. We'll find out about that later. . . . But what a relief! I feel as if a mountain had been taken off my chest! . . . Now I can get even with that goat-bearded scribbler!'

His wife was anxiously waiting to know what had happened.

'You want to know what has happened? Well, all I can say is that your son has made a new man of me! Oh, damn and blast it! Come here and dial that what d'ye call it . . . that number with a seventeen in it!'

'But what are you going to do?'

'Dial, I tell you, that number that starts with a seventeen!'

The signora perched two pairs of spectacles on her

nose, one on top of the other, and dialled Notary Puglisi's number.

'Hallo! Is that you? . . . Now, listen to me; there's just one thing we've got to do! . . . Yes, it's me, Alfio Magnano. . . . Listen to what I've got to say. . . . What we've got to do is to go, all three of us, you, me and my son, to any woman you like, wherever you please . . . to a brothel if you like . . . and you've got to stay there and watch right up to the finish! What do I want you to watch? Watch my son do his stuff, of course!'

'Alfio, Alfio!' half groaned, half shouted Signora Rosaria and put out her hand, as if to restrain him.

The notary, at the other end of the line, answered politely.

'You must be mad,' he said. 'If you're a lunatic the best thing for you to do is to go to Palermo! They'll look after you well there!'

'No, I'm not mad! I'm no madder than you are! And get this properly into your thick skull that, before you go around spreading slander, you've got to come with me and my son, whether you like it or not, because if you don't, old as I am, I'll drag you there by your beard and rub your nose in . . . you know what! . . . You've got to see with your own eyes!'

'The day after tomorrow we are putting the matter in the hands of our lawyer. It's a matter for the lawyers to deal with from now on!' the notary answered in a cold and distant voice.

'No, no, no, no! First you've got to see yourself . . . at what's its name . . . the whorehouse . . . I'll drag you there by the nose! . . .'

'But, Papa, Papa! What are you doing?' Antonio had heard the last few words; he snatched the receiver from

his father and put it down on its cradle, cutting off the notary's reply.

'Papa, are you trying to kill me?'

'It will be the death of me, not you. I want . . .' exclaimed the old man, collapsing into a chair and fanning himself with his hand, ' . . . water, a little water!'

The next morning Signora Rosaria went to say her prayers at the little Church of the Madonna in Via Sant' Euplio. She was kneeling before the altar of Santa Rita, when she heard a voice.

'I am sure that I know the thoughts that are troubling this poor head!' it said. The hands of a young priest rested on the grey hair piled around the back of her neck and held in place by innumerable hair-clips.

It was Father Raffaele, her new confessor, who had taken Father Giovanni's place after the latter's heart had suddenly stopped during a sermon; he had worked himself up into an ungovernable rage at the misdeeds of certain, unspecified, lost souls, which the Fascist spies kneeling in the crowded church had no difficulty in recognising as Nazis.

'Father Raffaele,' said the Signora, looking at him with the eyes of a frightened child, 'do you really know?'

'I know; it is a sad fact, but I do know!'

'But who could have foreseen such a terrible misfortune? . . .'

The priest gave a compassionate smile.

'But is it true that the Church is against us?' and she stared, with frightened eyes, at all the saints who looked down at her from their niches and chapels.

'What is this that you are saying? The Church is always on the side of Truth and Justice.'

The signora looked searchingly into his face; it was difficult for her to understand how it was possible for the young priest's eyes to be so gentle and reassuring and for his words to be so vague and obscure.

'And Barbara? You know Barbara, what do you think of her?'

'I cannot form an opinion in my holy capacity, much less stand in judgment over her; the shepherd's task is to guide his lambs, not to judge them. But I must confess that . . . ' The priest hesitated.

'That? . . . '

'That I have found her to be hard of heart.'

'What do you mean by that?' begged the signora, tortured by the fact that she could not rightly interpret the words of this man whom she admired and trusted.

'It means a heart that God has fashioned to confound us poor priests, that we cannot find our way to, that we cannot understand! All her sentiments are irreproachable, from the point of view of our Church; we can but approve of and admire them, and yet,' he added, flushing with the rich blood of a man of peasant stock, 'and yet, if I listened to my own heart and not to my reason, I would never, never, allow her to be admitted into church, not even after her death!' He finished on a note that was almost a shout.

The young priest's face had lost its usual tired, twilight colourlessness; the marks left by prolonged meditation and study seemed, all of a sudden, erased; even his cheeks seemed to lose their hollowness. Anger, a typically southern and more particularly Sicilian form of uncontrolled rage, boiled up obscurely behind his remote and faintly squinting eyes.

'That young woman's heart is like a polypus; the more

you cook it the tougher it becomes ! The more you argue with her the less you succeed in convincing her, and in matters of church dogma she is more learned than the devil himself ! Do you want to know what she said to me—not in the confessional, of course, because in that case my lips would be sealed ? . . . She said to me that ever since they had explained to her that the Church considers her marriage null and void, she does not allow herself to love a man who is not, *de facto*, her husband ! Do you understand ? She does not allow herself any longer. . . . It is very convenient to have a mind and soul like that, I must say—may God forgive me, tomorrow I will go and confess myself!—fashioned in such a way that she is quite immune to any kind of suffering, unless it is particularly to her own advantage or would please her parents, and that she will never possibly, by any stretch of the imagination, run the risk of losing her head or of losing a single lira !

Signora Rosaria was delighted at the priest's anger. Much of what he had said was over her head, but she caught the general drift of his remarks.

'Father, would it not be possible for me to talk to this girl ?'

'If you wish to, I see no reason why not ! But it will be a waste of time. All she's concerned with now is thinking about all that money which will soon be hers.'

'Money, what money ?' asked the signora.

'The Duke of Bronte, who's going to be Barbara's husband, as soon as the marriage with your son has been annulled, is worth thirty million ! . . . The facts are these: the moment this gentleman expressed his regret to her father at not having married a hard-headed girl like Barbara, her father happens to meet the archbishop and,

after the usual double-talk, asks his advice; what is he to do about his son-in-law and his daughter, and out comes the whole pitiable story. . . .

‘But if for seven months! . . .’

‘Exactly, for seven months he had known all about the unsatisfactory relationship between Antonio and Barbara, but what do you expect? In all those seven months he had not happened to meet the archbishop! But, you will say, nothing would have been easier for him than to come to a parish priest like myself. For that matter he even had a Dominican friar in his own house, yes, his own friar complete with a nice long rope girdle! Oh, my dear lady, I am afraid that you are much too innocent! It would take at least an archbishop or the Holy Father himself to open the mouth of a Puglisi notary on such a delicate subject!’

‘But, Father, do you really think that the marriage will be annulled?’

‘I’m afraid so, dear friend. I don’t want you to be under any illusion! If the reports which have reached me are true, the marriage will be annulled without a doubt!’

•  
This was too much for poor Signora Rosaria; tears ran down her cheeks. •

‘But just think of it, Father!’ she sobbed. ‘My Antonio . . . my lovely boy who made Father Giovanni frown when he came into church on Sundays because all the women would keep on turning round to stare at him. . . . My Antonio, Father, who had all the women in Rome running after him and behaved no better with them than you would expect! After all, you can only be young once! . . . Sometimes I hit myself on the head because the Lord took my words too much to heart when I prayed

to him to make my son less hot-blooded ! . . . You want him to be less passionate, the Lord answered me; all right I'll cool him off for you for good ! Can it be, Father, that the Lord wanted to punish me for my presumption, and so he sent us this misfortune, this terrible disgrace ?'

'But there's nothing disgraceful about it, Signora Rosaria !'

'Oh, it is a disgrace, Father ! . . . There's no question about it, it's a terrible disgrace ! Why, even the Church puts the blame on us, even the very reverend archbishop himself, who has forgotten all the favours he has to thank my husband for, only sees Barbara's side and is all against my Antonio !'

'Oh, my blessed Lord, I don't seem to be able to make you understand ! The Church blames no one, it simply annuls the marriage !'

'You call that nothing, Father ! . . . It annuls the marriage ! It does just what Barbara wants, what the notary wants, what the duke wants. . . . If it didn't put the blame on us, it would do what *we* want, and it would refuse to annul the marriage ! . . . No, Father, no ! God wanted to punish me; I wish my tongue had fallen out of my mouth, because I prayed too hard to have my son made less hot-blooded ! I see now that a mother should never interfere, should never pray that way, not even in her dreams; she should let her sons do what they want, and let them enjoy themselves ! . . . But it was Father Giovanni, may God rest his soul, who gave me the fright of my life, when he said to me: "If your son goes on like this, he will provoke a riot in the Holy Church, and the Church will have to punish him most severely !" And now my son has become as pure as an angel, he behaves like an angel descended from heaven, like Saint Joseph

with the Madonna, and yet the Church still wants to punish him, yes, even more severely, and is ready to do a thing which will mean that no member of our whole family will ever be able to hold his head up again! But what has the Church got against my son? What harm has he ever done it? What harm has any of us done it?’

‘Your poor head is filled with confused ideas, my poor dear lady! What can I say to make it all clear to you?’

‘My Father, have I not spoken the truth? Am I not thinking straight? Perhaps I was jealous when I was told that my son was pleasing to other women! But whom should a son be pleasing to, if not to other women? Instead of offering up silly prayers like that, why did I not thank the Lord, with my tongue hanging out of my mouth like a dog, for having given me a son so handsome that the girls ate him up with their eyes? . . . And now . . . here I am . . . and no one wants to help me, not even you, Father Raffaele!’

‘No, signora, you are being less than just to me! I am ready to kiss the feet of your son, if he will allow me to, miserable sinner that I am.’ And the priest thought sadly and penitently of his own shortcomings; how many times, usually in the afternoon after a nice steaming bowl of coffee and milk, when his blood had felt as fresh as the dew, had he visualised Barbara in all her tantalising beauty? And had his nice cool blood not boiled up to fever heat every time? Was this not perhaps the real reason why he was being so hard on Barbara?

‘It is Barbara who should kiss his feet, not you, Father Raffaele! That girl who is hacking at his flesh with a poisoned knife. . . . Father, you must do me one favour, you mustn’t refuse me!’

‘What favour, signora? Tell me!’

'You must arrange for me to talk to my daughter-in-law, but not at the house of those scheming villains, but here, in the Church, before Jesus Christ who will be looking down upon us!'

'As you wish, dear friend! Come on Saturday, at five in the afternoon, and your daughter-in-law shall be here.'

Two days later, punctually at five, Signora Rosaria returned to the Church of the Madonna in Via Sant' Euplio.

At that moment Don Luigino Compagnoni was moving away from the grating of a confessional; a man who, in his youth, had terrorised the surrounding countryside with his acts of brigandage; it was he who had been responsible for the fact that five girls had lost their innocence under a tree, one after another, in an incredibly short time, no longer than it takes a robin to open its beak. . . . But now, today, what gentle eyes he had! What a taste he had acquired for respectable bourgeois habits, you could see that from his clothes! It was this good bandit who gave Signora Rosaria the only comforting and understanding salute which she had received during this period of trial; he stood in the middle of the church and bowed obsequiously, raising his right hand to his head as if to take off his hat, which he was holding in his left hand.

As the signora's eyes looked away from the gentle eyes of the reformed brigand and into the cold ones of Barbara, who was kneeling before the chapel of Santa Rita, she felt her hands begin to tremble violently, partly from rage and partly from dismay.

'Good day,' she said in a very low voice.

'Please grant me your blessing!' answered Barbara.

The two women knelt silently, side by side, each pretending to be reading the breviary.

‘Shall we go into the sacristy?’

‘Just as you please.’

Father Raffaele left them alone in one of the little rooms of the sacristy. For a moment—they stood face to face, but with their eyes averted.

Suddenly Barbara threw herself down at the old lady’s feet and, bursting into tears, clasped her round the knees.

Signora Rosaria tried to stroke the girl’s hair, but her hands shook so violently that they more often stroked the empty air.

Barbara went on sobbing, at first softly; then her sobs grew louder and faster, ending in a sort of strangled cry. Finally she started speaking; words gushed out of her mouth, so mingled with sobs that they were distorted and indistinct.

But Signora Rosaria thought that she heard her say: ‘I want to be forgiven! I beg your son to forgive me for the wrong I have done to him! I must prove to him that I mean to atone for it!’

Signora Rosaria felt her heart melting with relief and tenderness; she tried to comfort Barbara, whose tear-stained face was pressed against her knees.

‘That’s enough! That’s enough! Don’t upset yourself, my dear, enough!’

But she was horrified when Barbara, who had stopped crying, pronounced more clearly the words she had previously said. This time what Signora Rosaria heard was: ‘Antonio must beg me to forgive him for the wrong he has done to me! He must be made to atone for it!’

Actually she had only given way to tears because she was sorry for herself; her only emotion had been and still was one of self-pity.

The signora was at first speechless, but finally she became so angry that words were forced from her.

‘What has Antonio done to you?’

‘Signora, when I married Antonio—may God in whose house we stand bear me witness—I was as innocent as a child of three. It was then that I should have died. It was then that the Lord should have gathered me to his bosom! I should have gone straight to heaven! Every word that came out of Antonio’s mouth was God’s own word to me. . . . God in heaven and Antonio on earth! that was my religion. . . . I loved him better than my own soul! . . . And I thought that he, too, loved me. . . .’

‘Well, wasn’t that the truth?’

‘No, it was not the truth!’

Barbara started sobbing again, very softly, as if to herself.

‘I am not a child of three any more and am not prepared to swear by Antonio’s words as I swear by the words of the Gospel! Now I know!’

‘What do you know?’

‘What every married woman ought to know.’

‘But explain what you mean, my dear girl! You’ve been twisting a knife into my heart; take it out!’

‘Antonio never loved me; he’s always despised me.’

‘Then why did his eyes light up every time he looked at you?’

‘Yes, he was kind and affectionate, he could not sleep unless he had his arms around me. . . .’

‘Do you see? Isn’t that enough for you? He treated you as if you were the rarest treasure in the world.’

There was a pause; then Barbara repeated in a cutting tone of voice :

‘He despised me !’

‘Unless you can explain to me why he despised you I shall believe that you do not believe it yourself and are only making excuses !’

‘Excuses? Excuses? . . . Then why did he treat me as if I were a log of wood? Do you think that he treated his other women that way?’

‘Barbara, you are still a child ! You think you know everything, but you have a very long way to go before you really know the facts of life ! What happened to Antonio is most unfortunate . . . it was a misfortune . . . a misfortune, daughter mine . . . which could happen to anyone !’

‘I know that, I know that it could happen to any man !’

‘And do you know why it happens?’

‘I know.’

‘It happens when a man loves a woman too much, when his heart beats too fast . . . when he thinks the woman is so marvellous that she’s too good for this world. . . .’

‘I know. . . . But it happens for one, two, three days ! It might even last for a month. But then, when he regains his confidence and sees that his wife is just a woman of flesh and blood like all the others . . . he finds that he is quite capable. . . .’

‘But if a young man does not lose the feeling that his wife is too good for this world and if his heart goes . . .’

‘No, don’t let’s talk about his heart any more ! It’s true that when we were first married I could feel it beating madly even through the pillow. But later on not even

when he held my hand against the left side of his chest . . .

'You see, how much he loved you? He slept with your hand held against his chest, the way he used to do with me when he was a child! He's still only a baby, a baby! . . .'

Barbara lifted her chin with an expression of annoyance and almost of boredom.

'Yes, but when he slept clasping your hand to his bosom, dear Signora, it was a sign of his love for you; when he slept with me, holding my hand that way was a sign of something very different . . . that I meant nothing more to him than a log of wood!'

'You're back again with your log of wood! . . . After all, Barbara . . . we're both of us married women, you're no longer a child. Time is passing for you, too. When I was your age my son was already twelve years old. . . .'

'It's not my fault that I have no son!'

'Now, little one! Please remember that it is always better to be decently respectful to one's elders! I am as good-natured and kind as the next person, but I am not going to take that sort of jibe, full of Puglisi poison, lying down! . . . One look at your face tells me how much money you've got in your pocket!' Barbara jumped to her feet. 'Don't get excited!' continued Signora Rosaria. 'Don't think you're making any impression on me! You can stand up, sit down, lie down, put your head down and your legs up in the air . . . just as you like! It's all the same to me! We are not leaving this room until we have told each other the truth!'

'As if you didn't know what that is!' said Barbara bitterly.

'Don't get excited! It will be better for you if you keep calm. . . . Let me speak first. And let me tell you first of

all that it was silly of you to tell me that story about Antonio despising you! Oh no! You Puglisis can't put that sort of thing over on me, because I know what you're thinking before you open your mouths to say BOO! . . . I know you all as well as if I had counted the hairs on your bodies! . . . So let's forget that little story about despising! You know, as well as I do, that Antonio doesn't despise you, because he has no reason to despise you. On the contrary, he loves you as much as a man can love any woman! How do I know it? I know my son so well that even the sound of his steps coming towards me tells me what's in his heart. It's been the same ever since he was a baby; I only had to hear him turn over in bed and I knew what he had been dreaming about! . . . So enough of that stupid story. Why tell me lies? . . . Why should he despise you? . . . You're as beautiful as a rose in full bloom, you're as healthy as a heifer, you've got lovely big green eyes, long jet-black hair, and skin as white as . . . Oh, it's just as if you'd been made to order to please Antonio!

'Yes, but . . .'

'Yes, but nothing! . . . He's been unlucky, poor boy! It was not God's will. . . .'

'That's the point; if it was not God's will . . .'

'Not so fast! Let me finish! . . . It was not God's will in the past, but tomorrow who knows? You're all wet before the rain starts! Even if the fat was already in the fire it wouldn't have hurt us to wait a little longer!'

'What would have been the use of waiting?'

'What would have been the use? Something that does not happen today may very well happen tomorrow! There isn't a woman living who wouldn't want to have Antonio! . . . This time the devil has tied him up in a

knot! But what does that matter! The knot can be untied! You could have waited. Daughter of God! It isn't as if you were being drowned or suffocated!

'Signora, this conversation is becoming absurd. We're completely at cross purposes. I see no point in our continuing it. I was hoping that you were going to sympathise with me knowing what I have been through in the last three years!'

'You talk as if you had suffered the tortures of the damned, Barbara! Why do you talk to me like that? You suffering tortures? . . . Any normal woman can be perfectly happy without it! Nobody dies from the lack of it! My husband was called into the army just twenty days after we were married, and I stayed at home, quietly waiting for him, for two whole years. Do you think that I kept on thinking about that? Why, God have mercy upon us and deliver us, I never even gave it a thought!'

Barbara grew red in the face and her pupils dilated.

'That's too much,' she shouted. 'The Lord did not bring me into the world to be insulted by the Magnanos! First your son treats me as if I were a piece of dirt and now you insult me. . . . Enough! . . .'

'Enough? Not by a long way! If I don't get rid of what I have boiling inside me, I'll burst!'

'Then listen to me! It's no use your talking about something that I have never even experienced. Up till seven months ago I didn't even know that it existed. Not an evil thought nor a single stupid idea had passed through my head. I think that I must be the coldest of women. . . .'

'Exactly, exactly, exactly! That explains everything! Out of your own mouth! . . . Blame yourself, then, for everything that has happened! I've always thought that

you were as cold as ice! You'd freeze off any man! It's evident that you've no one but yourself to blame!

'Signora, my respects!' said Barbara turning abruptly away. She waited long enough to control the trembling of her lips, opened the door, walked down the corridor, through a second door into the nave of the church; a sudden ray of sunshine came through the stained-glass window, splitting into all the colours of the spectrum. Barbara looked as if she were standing in a rainbow; she then tossed her head and walked out of the church. She left Signora Rosaria a prey to bitter thoughts and conflicting emotions; she knew that she had been in the right, but that she had been manœuvred by a clever adversary into a position so false to make her state her case in an unskilful manner; she was not only annoyed at having failed, and being insulted to boot, but also full of remorse. The poor lady bit her handkerchief and wept.

A little later Father Raffaele conducted her to the door of the church.

'I told you so!' he said. 'No one can do anything with that girl! You should have been more careful! She is sincere only when she conceives a sentiment which is likely to be of practical use to her. She talks with the devilish authority and the deceptive fire of a person who is always guided by cold reason and nothing else. She doesn't know it herself, but she *thinks* her emotions before she feels them.'

'Father Raffaele, do you remember when, seven years ago, you came to my bedside, when I thought that I was dying, to celebrate the last rites?'

'As if it were yesterday, dear friend!'

'While you were anointing me with the holy oil, I prayed to the Madonna to let me live until I could see

my son married. . . . Oh, Father Raffaele, what a mistake that prayer was! How much better it would have been if I had not lived to see this tragic day!

'No, signora, you are adopting the wrong attitude towards this whole affair. Your son has neither committed murder nor robbery. Just think of all the poor women whose sons are murderers or thieves!'

'What do you want me to say, Father Raffaele? I am losing my faith. It seems to me that the Lord has never afflicted anyone else with such a terrible disgrace!'

'You're blaspheming, dear friend! In time you will realise that what has happened to your son is neither a disgrace nor a dishonour. It's all Barbara's fault! Perhaps I am being too harsh? She is what she was made. Perhaps she is better than a great many others and she is certainly better than I am with my stupid chattering. . . . But, above all, I advise you to say nothing to your husband! We Sicilian men are too hot-blooded. Goodbye, dear friend. May God protect you!'

But Signora Rosaria was quite incapable of not telling her husband.

'I know that you meant well,' he said, 'but it was a mistake to talk to her! Besides, you talked much too freely and gave yourself away! You should have talked as I have learnt to talk to the Puglisi clan. Look, this way: with lips drawn tightly together, just as they do. I've prepared a few really biting phrases that, as sure as God is in His heaven, will freeze the marrow of the first of that lot I come across, yes, and keep it frozen for the rest of his life! We'll see whether Alfio Magnano isn't just as capable of being a Jesuit as they are!'

Two days later he met Father Rosario, Barbara's uncle, in the Via Etnea.

The friar tried to avoid old Magnano at first; he turned his back on the street and gazed intently at the display in a shop window, but he suddenly realised that it was hardly decorous for a Dominican to be staring at women's corsets and brassières; he turned around and found himself face to face with the very person he wanted to avoid. But he was astonished at what followed; he had expected an outburst from the peppery old man; instead he was confronted by a quiet old gentleman who smiled at him and spoke in a well-modulated voice, keeping his lips stiff and his mouth almost closed!

'As an expert in these matters I wish you would explain something to me,' said Signor Alfio. 'How is it that the Church considers a marriage null and void simply on the grounds that husband and wife do not indulge in the carnal act?'

'Ah, I really know nothing about that sort of thing, dear Signor Alfio! I assure you that I do not want to interfere in the young people's quarrels; I want to have nothing to do with it! They've made their own bed, now let them lie in it!' He stopped short in confusion and then hurried on. 'It's none of my business, I will have nothing to do with it!'

Sweating from head to foot with the effort of restraining himself, Signor Alfio answered.

'I know, but I want to have this point explained to me, in general so to speak, not so far as my son is concerned. . . . I am very curious to know the theological theory involved!'

The friar stole a quick look at the face of his interlocuter and, seeing it to be pale, composed and serene, he shivered. Such tranquillity was not normal in Signor

Alfio's case and, if one of them was to be calm, he preferred it to be himself.

'Listen, dear friend! Speaking as a Christian and a relative, I quite understand your grief and your indignation!' Signor Alfio restrained a groan and managed one more smile. 'No, no, no, let's not pretend; you're a father and, as your own son is involved, you can't be expected to see things straight!' said the friar, watching the other closely.

'Let's go in there! We can talk there without being interrupted!' burst out Signor Alfio, conscious of a deep flush that started under his collar and flooded his face.

They walked into the damp and deserted courtyard of a large and old-fashioned building.

Here Signor Alfio resumed his normal tone of voice and let his face grimace and contort itself as much as it wanted.

'And now tell me, and now explain to me! Why does the Church consider a marriage null and void simply on the grounds that the carnal act has not been performed? What does the Church want, that they — all day and all night? Is that what the Church wants?'

Seeing Signor Alfio foaming at the mouth, the Dominican sighed with relief and smoothly adopted the composed manner of speech which his adversary had abandoned.

'Marriage, my dear Signor Alfio, is a true Sacrament. I will go so far as to say that it is one of the most solemn Sacraments.'

'It is precisely because I say that it is sacred, that it should not be broken from one day to another, only because the husband, for his own very good reasons, was not willing to play the two-backed beast.'

'I object to your manner of expressing yourself. Marriage is a Sacrament. . . .'

'To the devil with your Sacrament! . . .'

'Kindly refrain from blaspheming; if you persist in blaspheming I shall go away!'

'You're not going away, my reverend friend; you're not leaving this spot! So, let us reason this out. Marriage is what it is. . . .'

'No, no, no! Marriage is *not* what it is, marriage is a Sacrament! And do you know who officiates? The two people who are to be joined! The priest consecrates, he does not officiate.'

'Very well! and what does that lead us to? And where is it written that the Sacrament can be annulled just because the husband, for reasons of his own, I repeat, which I do not want to go into at this point, doesn't care to cross his wife?'

'Don't talk that way, I beg of you, I beg of you! . . . Marriage consists of two elements: a spiritual and a material one. . . .'

'Very well, excellent! Suppose that one person makes a particular marriage consist only of a spiritual act—I mean this only to apply to a hypothetical case because we Magnanos always do it all the time come hell come high weather!—but, anyway, if a person, whatever his motive, wants to make it consist entirely of a spiritual act, what has the Church to say? She should be satisfied, in fact delighted, as she is always preaching against the flesh!'

'But in marriage, dear Signor Alfio, the material act is as sacred as the spiritual! *Caro una, sanguis unus. . . .*'

'Talk a Christian Italian, Father, so that I can understand you!'

'Caro una, sanguis unus: One flesh, one blood!'

'Aha, so that's your tune now! Now that you're coveting the Duke of Bronte's land! And when my son in Rome . . . and I myself up to yesterday, here . . . practised the one flesh, one blood business with our women, why did your confessors set up such a squealing, behind the grating of their little wooden boxes, that you would think that we were wringing their necks?'

'But, Signor Alfio, you're not being reasonable! You were practising one flesh, one blood with women that were not legitimately your own!'

'Very well, they may not have been legitimately ours, but they didn't try to run away, in fact they were extremely happy to lie where they were! . . . When a man's wife is seriously ill, or when he is a bachelor, where in the devil's name is he to find this one flesh, one blood if he doesn't stray into his neighbour's field?'

'Do you know what a man should do in such circumstances, dear Signor Alfio? Remain chaste! Are you labouring under the delusion that chastity is harmful? It is most beneficial to both body and mind! Chastity is the greatest of all virtues. . . .'

'Sacram! . . . You're enough to make a saint blaspheme! . . . And if chastity is the greatest of all virtues, why, when a man practises it in his own home, do you curse him, slander him and annul his marriage?'

'God's own patience! But marriage, as I have told you, consists of two elements: one spiritual, or intentional, and one material. If the material act is not consummated it is self-evident that the intention was a depraved one. Increase and multiply, said our Lord. . . .'

'And aren't there enough of you, monks and bishops

and cardinals, crows of the devil and empty wind-bags, to swell the family?’

‘I beg of you once more, Signor Alfio, not to speak in that irreverent fashion!’

‘I’ll talk as I please, not as it pleases you!’

‘Very well, I shall leave you!’

And Father Rosario made as if to go away.

‘And if you go away,’ shouted Signor Alfio, swept away by ungovernable rage, ‘I’ll run after you and disgrace you in front of everybody!’

‘Anything, my dear friend, that you might say to me would run off me like water from a duck’s back!’

‘And if I shout out to everybody I meet that Puglisi flesh is being sold to the highest bidder?’

‘Now you, Signor Alfio, are going too far! I’ll make you pay for this!’ The priest lost his head completely and shouted, his eyes becoming suffused with blood.

‘I’m not going too far, it’s the literal truth!’

‘It’s a lie!’

‘No!’

‘Yes!’

‘No!’

‘Yes, you don’t know what you’re talking about!’

‘No, I do know what I’m talking about!’

‘Yes, by God, don’t know what you’re talking about!’

‘No, by God, do know what I’m talking about!’

The priest slapped himself on both cheeks, then slapped himself twice more, partly to control and partly to give vent to his rage, to hit someone and to mortify himself; then, with his face buried in his hands, murmuring incoherently and, it is to be feared, sobbing, went out of the courtyard and turned to the left.

Signor Alfio did not follow him.


## CHAPTER EIGHT

'Our enterprises are likely to fail only when our desires and a feeling of respect are so exaggerated as to produce tension and strain. . . .'

MONTAIGNE

'He begged me to help him find a remedy for his spiritual state of anguish; I put him in the hands of a little actress of my acquaintance, but I fear that even she was not very successful.'

GIDE

 LD MAGNANO'S COURAGE failed him when it came to telling Signora Rosaria about his conversation with the priest.

All day long he sat watching his wife at her mending. From time to time she took off her spectacles and wiped them free of tears. Each time Signor Alfio brandished his arms in the air and brought them down on his thighs with a resounding thwack.

'I can't bear this any longer! The more I think of it the more I am convinced that it can't possibly be true! . . . How could it be? What really happened? . . . What did he mean to do? And why? . . . Why? . . . Has he said anything to you?'

The signora shrugged her shoulders without raising her eyes from her mending.

'As his father, I should be the one to talk to him! But how? I'd rather tackle God Almighty himself than my own son! A nice state of affairs!'

At the end of June, Ermenegildo Fasanaro, Signora Rosaria's brother, arrived in Catania, after an absence of  
158

twenty years. He had been living abroad and returned tired and incredibly emaciated; the skin of the whole of his body sagged to such an extent that he seemed to have no flesh on his bones. His teeth had always been so long that a little white showed even when his month was shut; not a defect in a man of so genial a nature that it prompted him frequently to flash his incisors in an irresistible smile; but now his gums were completely retracted and his teeth, deeply stained with tartar, seemed enormous, like the teeth of an old horse; the gaps between them were so wide that, at the end of each meal, the inside of his mouth seemed to be festooned with shreds of vegetables and fruit. Gone for ever the nice rounded belly, the swelling chest and the smooth contours of his face! When he walked along the Via Etnea he tried to keep his pace as brisk as in the old days when people used to say, 'When you walk past us, Signor Gildo, you raise such a breeze that our hats get blown off!' But now he had to stop all too often to catch his breath and he leaned heavily on the ebony cane with its silver handle which, in 1918, he had twirled in so debonair a fashion; now it was an effort to even lift it.

He went into his old café as unobtrusively as possible, in order not to attract attention, but the woman serving behind the bar noticed him at once and stared at him stupidly for some time; then came a glimmer of intelligence . . . and the woman lowered her fat chin and shook her head.

'But, I beg your pardon, aren't you the Cavaliere Fasanaro?' she asked.

'Yes,' he answered, wiping the remnants of a cream puff from his mouth.

'You *are* the Cavaliere Fasanaro?'

'Yes,' he said again in a timid voice. The woman made the sign of the cross three times.

'You! . . . Father, Son and Holy Ghost! Oh, God be praised, the things life does to you! . . . Carmelo! Carmelo! Come and see what's happened to Signor Fasanaro!'

Cavaliere Fasanaro hurried out before the proprietor could finish washing his hands and come to have a look at him.

His sister Rosaria and Signor Alfio were the only ones who paid no attention to the deplorable change in his appearance; they were too absorbed in their own troubles. Signora Rosaria told him the whole story:

'See if he'll talk to you!' she said. 'We haven't the heart to ask him any more questions! Antonio has always liked you and he trusts you. Please do it for our sakes. It would be a blessed miracle if you could find out from him what really happened and what he intends to do. If we knew we could dismiss the whole thing from our minds!'

'That's all right for you!' Signor Alfio objected. 'You might be able to forget about it and not talk about it any more. But I'll go on talking as long as there's any breath in my body! I'll go on till I make them see green mice in their sleep! I'll make them hold on to their bottoms with both hands, the filthy scheming lot of them! I'll teach them to know who Alfio Magnano is! Every time they see Alfio Magnano, I'll bet that they'll cross over to the other side of the street! Every morning I'll stand outside that damned house of theirs, and as soon as I see one of them coming out of the front door I'll shout at the top of my voice: "Go back to bed, you pagan Judas! You're a walking danger to all the neighbours! Go back

to bed at once on your own two feet or I'll send you there with mine! Go back to bed, you Bronte lackey! A nice job you've made of selling your own daughter to him!"

"Those Bronte Princes," said Ermenegildo, compressing his sunken cheeks so as to be able to yawn better. "I knew them when I was a child because we lived in a part of their palace; you, Rosaria, ought to remember that!"

"No, I was born in the new house!"

"Ah, that's right, yes. . . . What a lot of memories! . . . In the new house, did you say? . . ."

"Don't change the subject! Let's stick to the point!" interrupted Signor Alfio.

"The point is that they're rich, enormously rich, so rich that they don't know what to do with their money. Do you know why?"

"Because they're sons of dogs and God always helps the sons of dogs."

"For three hundred years they've kept the family fortune intact. They never split it up like other families. When there are several sons they only allow the eldest to marry, and if he doesn't manage to produce an heir the parents very very quietly see to it that the wife has a shot with the second barrel. . . ."

"What does that mean, the second barrel?" asked Signora Rosaria.

"What does a sportsman do when his first shot misses the bird? He shoots with his second barrel. So if the princess has no luck by her husband she is obliged to accept her brother-in-law as a lover."

"May God preserve us from such infamy! And after that how dare they raise the Consecrated Host to their lips?" asked Signora Rosaria.

'They feel quite happy about the whole thing because they claim that a man cannot be cuckolded by his own blood brother. . . . Perhaps they're right, who knows? . . . In the old days the second brother always became an abbot, but lately they've just stayed bachelors! . . . When I was a little boy I used to stand for hours and hours on the balcony, with my head through the bars. . . . God, what a lot of memories! To think that I once had a head small enough to go through the bars of the balcony railings! . . .'

'Stop blathering and get on with your story! What were you waiting hours and hours for?'

'I was waiting for the prince's brother, the little duke, to come out.'

'With his mother?'

'What mother? He was over fifty. They called him the little duke because he was the younger brother. He always wore black, with a stiff collar, a bow tie with a diamond stick-pin, and carried a bamboo walking-stick under his arm. Sometimes there were two eggs in his front pocket instead of a handkerchief; I could see them from above; they bulged like two billiard balls.'

'Why did the crazy lunatic carry two eggs in his pocket? What arrogance! Did the silly little fop think that, just because he was the Duke of Bronte, he could carry two eggs in his pocket to display to everybody?'

'On the contrary, he carried them in his pocket to protect them from being broken, he didn't want to show them to anyone.'

'Well, what did he do with the damned eggs?'

'I found out afterwards that he was going to see his mistress, A certain Donna Concetta, the widow of a man

who was a waggoner by trade. . . . He, the duke, was as stingy as a Jew.'

Signor Alfio had never set eyes on the duke.

'Worse, ever so much worse than a Jew!' he exclaimed.

'Well, let's say he was as stingy as a miser. He gave his mistress, who was as poor as a church mouse, two eggs every time she gave him what the princess no longer cared to, after she had borne him two sons, the present prince and duke.'

'And Notary Puglisi,' shouted Signor Alfio, 'would scrape up pennies from the ground with his behind. There's another pinchpenny for you! He's actually preparing to take his daughter away from Antonio and give her to that disgusting crew!'

'The princess is as sterile as a mule; nothing takes with her, neither the first nor the second barrel. They say that they've even tried the salt cure! . . . that's why the relatives have given the second son permission to marry and have children.'

'That hog-belly have children? They tell me that when he goes to a certain brothel . . . ' The signora protested, but he brushed her aside and turned to his brother-in-law.

'Gildo,' he said, 'tomorrow after lunch we're going out and you'll be alone with him. . . . Gildo, I beg of you to do your very best! I'll worship you as if you were God descended to earth if you can manage to make him open his mouth and tell you the truth, the whole truth!'

'I'll do what I can, though I'd be wiser to go to hospital myself!'

The next afternoon the old couple and the maid left the house.

Ermenegildo pushed open Antonio's door, which was ajar.

Antonio had given a sigh of relief when he heard his parents go out and was resting on the bed. His face clouded a little when he saw Ermenegildo, who hastened to explain.

'I stayed at home because that louse of a Marraro asked for a month's holiday from the City Hall and now he doesn't know what to do with himself; he stands on the pavement like a rooster on a stone ready to pounce on any acquaintance he catches sight of and bore him to death. And I daren't go near the Via Etnea; the Federal Secretary is more than likely to come along with his retinue of boot-licking gravediggers and it turns my stomach just to see them. . . . I'll go out later. Do you mind if I keep you company for a while?'

'No, dear Uncle, stay as long as you like.'

His uncle sat down in an armchair, picked a book up from the table and began to leaf through it.

'Do you mind if I smoke my pipe?'

Antonio shook his head and shut his eyes. His uncle was able to watch him closely without fear of giving offence. He noticed how drawn and haggard his nephew looked and felt his own ills less acutely, as often happens when two people, both in distress, share a room as well as their physical and mental sufferings. He then asked Antonio if he would prefer to talk or keep quiet.

'I should like to hear you talk. Tell me about your travels!'

'Well, I went where I should never have gone! I went to Spain, worse luck for me, and I found out what our contemporaries are like, what men in general are like. . . . They're a rotten lot, Antonio; just as sure as you love

your mother, you can believe me when I say that they frighten me! Don't ask me who is right and who is wrong, or which of the two sides will win in the end! They kept their ideas in their heads, so I couldn't see them. But what I did see was that they were eager to skin, quarter and burn Jesus Christ himself; that applied to both sides and, if they happened to hate you, you could be prepared to let out a scream of pain such as you had never believed would come out of the bowels of a baptised creature like yourself!

He went to the balcony, opened the shutters, spat into the street, closed the shutters again and resumed his seat.

'You wouldn't believe the dodges they've thought up for torturing your poor flesh. One square centimetre of skin is enough for them to make a man sorry that he was ever born and beg them to kill him to put him out of his misery. . . . There's no brand of courage that can stand it, my boy! I'm no coward, but I couldn't stand it! Christian civilisation and social justice—fine words! They're both of inestimable value to man. But have a look at the corpses they leave for days in mud to rot or run over them with their tanks so that they become quite unrecognisable! Then tell me if that's the way to show a desire for civilisation and justice! Those corpses were men, too, by God, but you can't say that they got their share of them! You might say that all this was done for the sake of future generations. . . . But they will say the same and will butcher each other just as we do! . . . No, Antonio, believe me, men are terrifying creatures; I have nightmares about them when I go to sleep!'

'You're suffering from nervous exhaustion and you should take a soporific to stop yourself dreaming!'

'Call it what you like! . . . Nervous exhaustion is as good a label as any other. . . . But as for sleeping without dreaming, that's quite impossible for me, not even if I take enough veronal to put any ordinary man to sleep for good. My brain won't shut properly any more; like an old broken shutter, it lets in too much light. . . . And if it was only just light! . . . but noises, devils, speeches, too. . . . Why did I want to go and see what those infamous people were doing? I wanted to find out which was right and which was wrong and all that I found out was that they were all terrifying! That's the net result of my pleasure trip abroad! The only lucky thing for me is that I've got both lung and heart disease and there is every reason to believe that next year you'll be watching the firework display on Sant' Agata's day without me!'

'What are you talking about, Uncle? I'm sure that you'll outlive all of us!'

'No, don't take my one consoling thought away from me! I couldn't go to sleep at all at night if I weren't able to imagine to myself that death was sitting at the head of my bed. It's the only thought that gives me any pleasure. I should be left alone with agitation, terror, insomnia and cold sweats as my sole bedfellows. No, Antonio, I'm not exaggerating. Fortunately in a few months' time I'll be where neither revolutions nor counter-revolutions can have any effect upon me. Fascism, Communism . . . won't bother me any more. Whichever side wins, no dictator will be able to deprive me either of bread or God's good fresh air.'

Antonio reopened his eyes, feeling intimately in sympathy with this man who welcomed the idea of death.

'But let's talk about you; I'd much rather,' said his uncle 'What's been happening to you? . . . Frankly, I

know what's been happening! I couldn't help knowing! . . . Everybody here is asking: Why? how? . . . Well, you don't need to tell me! I'm not so dense as not to be able to reconstruct the whole story! All you have to do is to tell me if I'm wrong. Listen! . . . You went at it too hard! I remember you in Rome with a face like a burnt-out candle. There was as much coming and going in your house as if there had been a funeral . . . but only women came to view the coffin, and you were inside the coffin, stretched out like a dead man, but you were very much alive and always ready to start in all over again. The girls that came to visit you were more like queens than ordinary women! . . . One day I was going down the stairs and passed one of them, who was going up and, just because I stopped to have a look at her, she turned away as if she had seen a puddle of vomited spaghetti. But soon afterwards, if I'm any prophet, down went her nose and she was grovelling at your feet, only too happy if you'd stepped all over that Madonna's face of hers. . . . And you knew it only too well. . . . Always absent-minded, always looking out of the window as if you were thinking about souls in Purgatory. . . . You would yawn, sometimes you would repulse them and they only blazed with a hotter fire under their nice little breasts and who knows how they cajoled you, what caresses and what sacrifices they offered you! That's how they got you into bad habits and spoiled you. . . . And when, one fine day, you found yourself with a wife, who was a little proud, a bit stiff and reserved, the fly jumped on your nose, you turned your back on her and went to sleep for three years, dreaming about your women in Rome.'

Antonio gave one look at his uncle's face and closed his eyes again.

'And now tell me, am I right? How bitterly I envied you when I was still keen on women. And I may tell you that I was no half-way man myself with women! . . . But one day I just got tired of them. I thought to myself: Am I going to go on, after so many years that I can't remember the first time I did it, go on endlessly, and stupidly, filling flesh with flesh? It's always the same! Whether you go to bed with a queen or with a hunchback it starts the same way and finishes the same way. . . . But I keep on talking about myself. Tell me frankly: haven't I painted a true picture, true to the tiniest detail, of exactly what happened to you?'

'No!'

'What?'

'No!'

'Well then, you tell me the true story!'

'Do you really want to know the truth?'

'Of course!'

'Uncle . . . Uncle . . . you'll never believe it . . . but I . . .'

'Well?'

'I . . . it would have been better if I had never been born!'

'Why do you say that, Antonio? It's all right for me to say that, but that's a very different kettle of fish!'

'And why is it all right for you? Just because you found out that men weren't saints and that they killed and quartered each other? What does that matter to me. What does matter to me is that besides killing each other all men are capable of doing something else, that I, that I . . .' and his voice became high and shrill, 'that I . . . that I . . . have never been able to do!'

'Never? Have I understood you properly? Never?'

Antonio did not answer; he stood so stiffly and rigidly that his uncle found it impossible to make him turn around.

‘Antonio, I beg of you! Look me in the eyes! I am your uncle, a man of experience and understanding. You can’t be afraid of an old man like me!’

Antonio looked so pale and melancholy that he realised with a shiver that there was no hope of his having misunderstood Antonio or having been deceived by his exaggerated way of expressing himself.

‘But, Antonio, it’s impossible! I can’t believe it! Never? Do you really mean never?’

‘Almost never!’

‘That’s very different!’ Antonio said nothing. ‘Never is one thing and almost never is another thing! I must confess to you, that I, too, sometimes . . . I don’t mean always or even often . . . but sometimes? . . . Whoever eats bread makes crumbs, as the saying goes . . . the rider who rides too much must sometimes get off the saddle.’

‘Uncle, Uncle, don’t say anything else!’

‘All right, I’ll hold my tongue, but you must speak to me, my son; go on, talk!’

Antonio was incapable of speech. He said nothing for a long time.

‘No, my dear boy, no! I want you to speak to me frankly, sincerely and clearly; and don’t waste any time about it, because very soon I shall get my daily attack of dizziness, which always comes on at the same time, and I shan’t know whether I am standing on my head or on my feet.’

‘Almost never means that I, that that thing, I . . .’ Antonio shouted suddenly.

'Not so loud!' interrupted his uncle. 'Do you want the whole city to hear what you are saying?'

'Let the whole city know, what do I care? I . . . ' shouted Antonio, beside himself with excitement. He bit himself on the wrist and elbow and threw himself on the bed, breathing hard through his clenched teeth.

A little later Antonio was lying so quietly that his uncle thought that he must either be sleeping or in a dead faint.

At that point, however, a calm voice, a voice entirely devoid of feeling, inflection or human warmth, a dead and impassionate voice came from the pillow on which Antonio was resting his head.

'Yes, almost never. Until I was eighteen I did it in my dreams; then, just once, I half did it in a house on the Via Maddem and that night I vomited. It was the third of May 1924. After that I didn't do it any more, not even in my dreams, because every time that I passed that street or every time that I remembered that night I felt like vomiting. One day in a café, I saw a drawing, on the marble table-top, of two figures doing it. I turned as white as a sheet and had to run to the lavatory. At the same time I was madly in love with all women, especially with their faces, eyes and feet; at night in bed I only had to hear the sound of high heels walking away slowly and I started tossing about like a madman! I wanted to throw myself at their feet and beg for mercy!'

'But, my dear boy, if I am not mistaken, all the women were just as mad about you!'

'You all thought so, but I looked at it in a different way: it seemed to me that I saw an almost sarcastic invitation in every woman's eyes, a challenge to get close to them and show myself to be a man. They came towards

me offering me their breasts in the reckless manner of an adversary who points a loaded revolver at you . . . Perhaps I was wrong. . . .’

‘Of course you were wrong!’

‘In Rome, in 1930, I had a curious experience. The very evening of my arrival, after eating and drinking more than usual, and, before I had time to be frightened or nauseated, I went to a certain house and succeeded in proving myself to be a man! . . . It seemed incredible and I staggered out into the street so happy that I kissed all the walls and doors, all the way from the house to the Piazza San Silvestro. . . . During the night I dreamed of repeating what I had done and shouted so loud in my sleep that my landlady came running in her dressing-gown. I realised then that the way women smiled at me was not either ironical or challenging, but a sign of being really attracted to me. In fact the expression I had seen on the face of a woman twelve hours before, which had then seemed to me to indicate malevolent curiosity, really reflected a desire to become intimate with me. I understood that from her flush of contentment as soon as she came into my room and other things. . . . I won’t tell you that I was bold or went very far that night! I was satiated and had to wait. After six days, in fact, I was able to make my landlady a happy woman; the next day I had to pretend to be ill, otherwise it would have been difficult to explain why I did not carry on the affair, continuously, in the usual way. That was the happiest period of my life. I was twenty-four years old, the women were crazy about me and I, once every seven days, was able to make one of them as crazy with happiness as I was myself. The next day the lies and subterfuges started again; at all costs I had to avoid going back and sleeping with

the same one. . . . I don't know how many times I went off to Naples; there, tormented by the mandolins from the restaurants and the sound of kisses through the doors, I waited for the desire that was spread all over my body, so that even my hand exuded it whenever I touched a woman, to condense itself in the place that is made for it. . . . I have never told these things to anyone; I wrote and recopied them a hundred times on sheets of paper, which I later burned, and now I know them by heart! And I must tell you that when I thought of the only person in whom I might possibly confide my secret, that person was you!

His uncle squeezed his hand without saying anything.

'I was happy that year. I was even arrogant and overbearing. It was only once every seven days. . . . But I felt as if I were a bull. On the other hand, even if it was so infrequent, the sensation was so violent that the day before I got into a state of excitement much greater than other men ever get, even when they are undressing the woman they love for the first time; and afterwards, for two days, the savour of honey in my blood remained with me and if I saw or touched or heard anything vivid or vital it overcame me to such an extent that I nearly fainted. . . . Oh, life was wonderful! Too wonderful!

'In May, in a café in the Villa Borghese, I saw a German girl sitting at a table with her fiancé, a young Viennese officer. They were both so handsome that the couples around them seemed incredibly dull.'

'But you, yourself, are not exactly lacking in manly beauty!'

'Yes, I . . . very well. But if you had seen that Viennese officer, you would know what I mean! And the girl! She was tall with rose-coloured hair. . . .'

‘Rose-coloured, did you say?’

‘In any other woman I should have said red. But her hair was so beautiful that it seemed rose-coloured. Her eyes were bright blue, but they seemed to have a sort of white powdery film over them, like face-powder with an infinitely delicate perfume. . . .’

‘The devil and all!’

‘High, firm breasts, perfect long legs with knees in keeping with them! One seemed to see right through her clothes.’

His uncle felt a shiver travel all the way up his spine. ‘Isn’t it strange,’ he thought, ‘that I, old as I am, should get so excited just hearing him talk? . . . And this unfortunate boy?’

‘Every afternoon I went to the same café and the two Germans were always there. I pretended to be looking out over the panorama of Rome, spread out below us; but all the time I was seeing her, with the back of my shoulders, with the hairs at the back of my neck and even with my heart, which seemed to waltz round in my chest; the lovely buildings of Rome meant no more to me than rows of corpses. . . . A fortnight later I found the German girl alone, slumped down in a wicker arm-chair, hands in the pocket of her jacket, wearing a pair of blue sun-glasses and her legs showing the merest trifle more than usual. I stole a look at her, though I felt ashamed, because now that he was no longer there her fiancé seemed more godlike than ever; the empty chair beside her was overcast with a deep blue shadow and it seemed to me that he must have thrown it down from the sky to protect her. . . .’

‘How you exaggerate!’

‘There you go, singing the same old song again! But,

I tell you, that her fiancé would make a saint turn round in his coffin !’

‘All right, forget about her fiancé ! You were looking at the girl, weren’t you? . . .’

‘I was looking at her. . . .’

‘Well, and the girl? Was she looking at you?’

‘She did more than that—she spoke to me !’

‘Sacr . . .’ murmured his uncle between his teeth, feeling a thud in his chest, almost as if he were young and vigorous again.

‘She said to me: “Excuse me, signore, but do you always come to this place?” . . . “Yes,” I answered, not believing my ears. But is it really possible, I thought, that this girl has taken such a fancy to me that she has taken the initiative? What about her marvellous fiancé? She ought to be spending her time lighting candles in front of his photograph !’

‘Never mind that ! Let’s get on to what happened !’

‘Her name was Ingeborg; at home they called her Ing, and as she had lived in Paris, Ing was pronounced Ange by her French friends. . . . So I called her Angel !’

‘More exaggeration !’

‘Her fiancé had gone back to Vienna, and she read his long letters sitting by my side and got red in the face as if she were being kissed. “Good news?” I asked her. She gave a little smile and put the letter in her pocket. I would have gone on talking about her fiancé for ever, I had been so extraordinarily impressed by him, but she kept changing the subject. . . .’

‘Go on, go on ! Didn’t you try to arrange something?’

‘No, although, as I told you, I felt myself charged, overcharged with animality like a ram. Every three days

I spent the afternoon with one of the women whom I had taken such pains to run away from; each one of them had an attack of real hysteria when she unexpectedly saw my head on her pillow again. . . . Did you notice that I said *every three days*? Actually it was a miracle! I no longer had to wait seven days for the most savoury of fruits to ripen on my branch! One day I went with Ing to the Vatican, to a private audience. I was naïve enough to believe that the miracle might be due to divine intervention, which made me anxious to render homage to the Sovereign Pontiff. . . . When we left the Palace I remembered the purpose of Ing's visit to the Pope; she had asked him to pray to God that she might be vouchsafed a better relationship with her fiancé. So I asked her: "How can that be? What's wrong between you and your fiancé?" "Oh," she answered, "we agree perfectly about everything, we like the same books, the same music, the same pictures, the same streets and the same flowers, and he is so good and gentle, and so handsome. . . ." At that point I read on her lips a *but* black as the grave! . . .

'But, do get on with it, boy; did you water his bread for him . . . or not?'

'One evening we were riding in a closed carriage. I could not see her face and, for the first time when I was with her, I did not visualise her fiancé's face beside hers . . . !'

'Why does he drag it out so?' thought his uncle.

'I kissed her passionately, and, although I had spent the afternoon of the day before with a girl, I again felt all the honey inside me concentrate itself intensely on the spot in which I most wanted to feel it. . . . She said nothing, but inside myself I let out such a shout that

it must have reached all the saints in heaven, who had finally taken pity on me! . . . A week later, we were to have gone to the theatre, but, as soon as I met her I realised, from the way she held my hand, that she had decided to give herself to me that night. We went to the Opera to hear Don Giovanni. But I was quite oblivious to the stage and kept thinking: "But her fiancé? . . . How can she be unfaithful to him? All women must be crooked! . . ." We went straight from the theatre to her house. . . . Shortly afterwards . . .

'No, don't skip! Tell me everything as it happened! What room did she take you into?'

'Into her bedroom.'

'What, just like that, straight in?'

'Yes, and I, tired and beautifully happy, lay down flat on the bed. She went in to the bathroom and, shortly afterwards, came in to me in a dressing-gown, with her face bathed in tears.'

'Don't pay any attention to those tears!' shouted the uncle, as if he were watching a scene on the stage, an excited audience cheering the favourite: 'Give it to her; don't pay any attention to those tears!'

'She sat on the edge of the bed and told me the story of her life. . . . She came from an aristocratic German family and had gone to Paris to study. There she fell in love with a Spanish architect; to her surprise and joy he taught her everything about the one subject about which, up to then, she had not even been curious. The architect was a short little man and very ugly, but he had inflamed her with the heat of his blood. . . .'

'Naturally! He was a Spaniard, and Spanish is practically the same as Sicilian!'

'However, the family opposed the marriage. They con-

sidered him a member of an inferior race. Ing travelled to Berlin and argued with her parents, but they remained as obstinate as a stone wall. . . .

'Bloody Germans!'

'The architect, his pride wounded by these objections and delays, wrote her a farewell letter, which he signed with all the titles of nobility which his own family could lay claim to. Ing returned to Paris, determined to throw herself into the Seine. On the train she met a friend of her childhood, the handsome Viennese officer I was talking to you about; he, too, was harbouring thoughts of suicide! A month later they were engaged. . . .

'Women!'

'They telephoned to her family in Berlin. They were delighted. They arranged to marry, and then . . . you know what different habits northern women have to ours. . . .

'I know a little about it!'

'As soon as it was decided that they were going to be husband and wife, they slept in the same bed. . . .

'Well, they slept in the same bed? . . .'

'And then . . .'

'And then?'

'He . . .'

'He?'

'Nothing!'

'What do you mean, nothing?'

'Just that . . . nothing!'

'By God! That tall, strong young man?'

'Yes.'

'And then?'

'Nothing!'

'What, again nothing?'

'Every time!'

'My God, my God!'

Ing confided in her mother, who told her to pay no attention to it, to get married just the same, that with time . . . But Ing began to be obsessed by the idea that the fault was hers, that it was she who was no good at it, that she should have known how to make him. . . . When I heard her talk like this I burst out laughing—I was still as proud as a turkey-cock in those days! "You?" I said. "What need you do? Why should you have to do anything, a beautiful girl like you? . . . the rustle of your petticoat is enough to set any man . . ." Ing threw her arms around my neck, in transports of joy and gratitude: my words were evidently exactly what she had been longing to hear. Now I understood—why the officer was contemplating suicide in the train, why the visit to the Pope—everything was clear to me. . . . Nothing more was said. She turned out the light and we fell into each other's arms. A little later, she was almost fainting with happiness and gradually opening out like a rose in the sun; I felt as full of happiness as she, when . . .'

He stopped. His uncle did not say anything either; he did not even notice that there was a beating in his right eye like a fly struggling in the grip of a spider.

'When . . .' continued Antonio and stopped again.

'When, suddenly, a cold wave swept through my body, starting with the part which I would have given anything in the world for it to leave to the last! . . . She was still lying on her back, her mouth raised and eyes closed. Congealed with, and in an agony of, shame, I slipped down by her side, pressing my trembling lips down on

to the pillow. This was the end, it was like death ! The blood which had been concentrated with such savour and heat on one point of my anatomy, seemed to have flowed out of the veins of my whole body. Feeling utterly exhausted and hopeless, I stayed for two hours by the side of a woman who lay absolutely motionless, as if crushed by the weight of her own and my shame put together; during that time everything I did to regain my manhood had the opposite effect of making me feel more and more incapable. . . . At the end of that time I rose from a bed which I could no longer see clearly; I had even forgotten its size and shape. I left the room, leaving behind me a woman whom I could also hardly remember. The contradiction between the intense pleasure she had once given me and the intense cold she had communicated to me that night made me think of her as a confused and, yes, frightening figure.'

## CHAPTER NINE

'There is a gloom  
When I can't hear your breath  
Calm in some room.'

H. MONRO

'... and the star of love floats far  
as the bright ray which crosses  
and bedecks it, as with a veil.'

DANTE

'Portia, after swallowing the burning coals, died in agony. . . .  
How will it be with me, who swallow the flames of my passion?  
My secret torture is that I must remain silent. . . .'

TIRSO DA MOLINA

**H**IS UNCLE SHOOK his head, very slowly, from side to side.  
'And then?'

'Please close the shutters!' said Antonio.

Ermenegildo closed the shutters. Antonio switched on the electric light and sat on the bed, propping his shoulders against the headboard. He looked more handsome than ever, but as thin as though he had been through a long illness.

'And then? . . . not a gleam, never again!'

'Meaning?'

'I buried myself in my room for a fortnight. Then, as I couldn't bear the place any longer, I moved to a little house overlooking the Villa Borghese. My father sent me up some furniture from home; the sight of it made me weep with rage, as it reminded me of my period of

180

nausea and longing for a woman, all women. A month later I went back to the Via Mario dei Fiori, to the brothel which had given me life the evening of my arrival in Rome. My limbs became colder and colder as I followed the woman—her name was Caterina—up the wooden, winding staircase; the room was heated by an oilstove. As she undressed I thought of a cunning ruse: I was still fully dressed and, leaning against a chest-of-drawers covered with photographs, I smiled.

““There is something I want to say to you,” I said. The woman was lying on the bed naked, with her hands under her head.

““What?” she asked curiously. “Do you know, darling, that you’re devilishly handsome. When I leave this dump I would like to spend a fortnight with you in Venice! We’ll have a marvellous time!”

““Right,” I said, “I agree, but on one condition! If I succeed in not rising to your most seductive caresses then you’ll have to pay the expenses of the trip. Otherwise I pay them, of course.”

““I accept!” she said enthusiastically. “When I get going not even a wooden saint could win a bet of that kind with me.” Then I, too, undressed quickly, in the hope of losing my bet.’

‘Did you lose it?’

‘After five minutes the sheets were soaked with the poor girl’s sweat; but I remained quite impassive . . . twenty minutes, half an hour.

““Listen,” she said at last, “you’ve won all right, I admit it. I’ll pay the expenses of our trip to Venice. . . . But now, please, don’t hold yourself in any more! Let go, follow your nature!” My answer was to get out of bed, laughing ironically, dress myself slowly and care-

fully and do my tie twice; then I threw her some money, as she lay on the bed more dead than alive, and walked out.'

'But you shouldn't have made that a test case! It was too soon! You should have waited longer.'

'But I had waited for a month and a half!'

'You can't hurry these things.'

'After that I even avoided talking to women for three months. One afternoon, my best time in the good old days, a girl turned up who had been trying to find me for a long time. I let her lie down beside me, I let her kiss me and almost rub the skin of my face away. She then accused me of having a heart of stone. . . . She was wrong, but I still would have been better off dead!'

'And then?'

'And then, and then, and then. . . . Is that all you can say, Uncle?'

'Just a minute! Don't try to drive me crazy! I may be in my second childhood, but not to the extent that you think!'

'Why do you say that, Uncle?'

'What do you suppose I mean? . . . Is it true or not that your house in Rome was always full of women? Is it true or not that they were all mad about you? Is it true or not that the Countess Kappio—or whatever her name was—came and rubbed herself against your door like a cat in January? Is all that true or have I been dreaming all my life?'

'The trouble I had to take, the lies, the subterfuges, pretences! What an exhibition I had to make of myself!'

'And why?'

'So that no one should know—friends, women, my father and mother, and you! . . . I had to keep it from all of you! . . .'

'Do you expect me to believe you?'

'Countess K. was the only woman who must have suspected the truth, because one evening she said to me: "Antonio, be honest, wouldn't it be convenient if you could sleep with a woman and use nothing but your eyes?" I don't know whether she was referring to our conversation of the previous evening, when she had said that the way I used my eyes reminded her of some Sicilian rake or other whom she had known in the past. . . .'

'Bitch! Why doesn't she come here? They'll do it for her all right; they'd use her as a front door! . . . and not with their eyes, I promise you! Why are you trying to make a fool of me, Antonio?'

'I'm not, Uncle! I tried to fool you up to yesterday. But today is the first time that I am telling you, or anyone else, the truth.'

'But, sainted devils, women, I say, are not so easily made fools of . . . about this, of all things! About the one thing in the world that matters most to them! Why, not even Beelzebub in person! Not even the king of swindlers could get away with it!'

'I did get away with it!'

'But be reasonable, be reasonable! You can tell a woman once that you're under oath not to, that you've got a pain in your stomach, that you've got to go to Holy Communion. But the second time, what are you going to tell her?'

'Uncle, I always found some excuse.'

'Always?'

'Yes, always!'

'But do you mean to tell me that not one woman, not a single woman ever smelt a rat?'

'No!'

'And am I, in your opinion, supposed to be such an idiot as to believe you?'

'Uncle Gildo, over a matter like this do you really want me to swear by the life of my mother and father? Do you want me to say: "May they be struck dead if I am lying"?''

'Heaven forbid.'

'That I should go blind? . . .'

'No!'

'That I may be shot down in a dark street?'

'No, no! . . . I believe you.'

After a moment's silence Ermenegildo continued: 'Well then, after that time with the German woman, nix, nothing any more, not even a stirring, a sort of un-tying, just a little something, half of a something if you like?'

'In 1933, in August . . .'

'Ah, here we are, you see? Well, in August?'

'I was at Collalbo, near a village called Soprabolzano. Have you heard of it?'

'Collalbo . . . of course! It's a summer resort.'

'Hardly a resort: a few wooden houses, an hotel, a park and a tennis court . . . surrounded by woods.'

'Yes, woods, naturally!'

'It lies on the side of a mountain nearly four thousand feet high. To the north you can see a lot of much higher mountains, the Dolomites.'

'Well, at Collalbo? . . .'

'Luigi d'Agata, Turi Grassi and the brothers Pertoni were with me. They wanted a woman so badly that they

were rolling on the grass like donkeys. They couldn't find one anywhere and were at their wits' end. When night came they were half crazed and lost all sense of decency; they rushed into a near-by wood and shouted at the top of their voices; the whole countryside heard them.

"What shall I do? Shall I cut it off? I can't stand this much longer, Sainted Mother of God! I'll cut it off and throw it to the dogs! . . ." For hours and hours they went on shouting: "What shall I do, shall I cut it off?"

His uncle smiled and Antonio continued:

'One evening a hypnotist turned up at the hotel . . . you know, one of those people who put you to sleep.'

'A hypnotist, yes.'

'He was a poor, half-starved devil; he showed up in tails, with his wife in evening dress. His wife was as fat as he was lean; she was as fat as a butcher's dog with the top half of her breasts popping out of her dress, and eyes, black as olives, which seemed so liquid that they flowed towards you. The hypnotist started by pulling flags, rolls of coloured paper ribbon and silk handkerchiefs out of his top-hat. He then put his wife to sleep; he made her walk out of the room, through a corridor, into a little room, where she stopped and stood immobile with her eyes tight shut. Ten minutes later, in a voice like thunder, the husband began to call out the numbers that three gentlemen in the audience had written on pieces of paper which he was in the act of unfolding; without hesitation she gave the numbers correctly.'

'Strange phenomena!'

'Do you know what Turi Grassi and Luigi d'Agata did the following evening? . . . They hid in the little room and, when the poor woman arrived, holding her

arms straight out in front of her and with her eyes shut, one of them, I don't remember which of them, leapt on her and had her, there and then, till he didn't want her any more.'

'What a story! and do you mean to tell me that the woman didn't even wake up?'

'What do you want me to say? She certainly didn't wake up . . . or pretended to be asleep to avoid a scandal . . . or perhaps she enjoyed it!'

'Very well . . . and what about you?'

'The whole affair put me into a great state of excitement; I felt as if a drop of flame had fallen on my flesh. God, was I excited! That night I went into the wood all by myself. The moon was on the Dolomites, the pine trees perfumed the night, and at the other end of the wood the faint sound of a band died away as the musicians marched away from Collalbo to a neighbouring village. Something definitely stirred in my blood; this was confirmed by my eyes and my ears, which, all of a sudden, seemed to give me back my old feeling of happiness, when an odd note or a ray of light could transport me into a state bordering on ecstasy. . . .'

'Go on! Don't stop!'

'I shall have to stop there, because, at that point, I myself stopped! Nothing else happened! My hopes were not fulfilled. My blood began to cool off and, once again, I felt as if a huge knife blade had been thrust between that part of me and the rest of my body.'

'Blood of Judas! Blood of Judas! . . . And then?'

'Dear Uncle, then, things went on just as unsatisfactorily as ever. I can't expect you to understand altogether. . . .'

'I do understand.'

'No, you couldn't possibly understand how much I suffered. It is like having a corpse in your life, a corpse put in such a prominent position that, whatever move you make, you brush up against it and feel the horrible cold clamminess of its skin.'

'I understand what you are trying to say. Yes, I understand only too well. You're wrong in thinking that I don't understand these things. . . . But what I don't understand is this. If you knew you were like that; if, for some considerable time at least, that animal which God gave us to torment us, fell on its knees instead of standing up as it should, why, in the name of Christ, why, son of our blessed Lord, why did you go and chuck yourself head first into a bramble bush? I mean go and get married? and what a marriage! with a mercenary girl, the daughter of mercenary parents, as cold as marble, as prickly as a hedgehog, touchy and suspicious, the kind that would misunderstand an ordinary compliment like: "What beautiful eyes you have!"; with a crucifix stuck between her breasts that pricks you like a dagger just at the crucial moment; stuffed full of advice by her confessor who forbids her to do this and that, until you feel as if he had climbed into bed with you and was watching every move you made and you have to be very careful what you say because tomorrow every word will travel back to the church; quick to turn her back on you over the slightest difference of opinion and wrap herself up in her part of the covers like a sack; who goes round in the daytime holding her nose, the keys of all the drawers and cupboards chained to her belt, counts every mouthful you eat, can't stand perfume because she says it stinks, never washes her hair because she says that water makes it fall out, bathes only once a week because

she says it weakens you. If you read the paper at table she gets in a huff; if you talk to her she answers in monosyllables; when you're affectionate to her she mutters that you've mistaken her for one of those; if you treat her coolly she accuses you of neglecting her. She's resigned, like a fool, to growing old, to growing grey, to bursting out of her clothes with unhealthy fat, to her feet swelling up and to walking as if a brick had fallen on her big toe; and, if you last better than she does, she'll wish all the ills of this world on you, not, of course, the ones that would kill you, but the ones that would make you suffer most while you're alive, to make you give up the idea of being still young, once and for all.'

'No, no, no, no!'

'No? What's wrong about my description?'

'You're far from the truth, dear Uncle, very far!'

'I'd like to be as sure of tomorrow's weather as I am of what I've just said.'

'You couldn't be more wrong, Uncle!'

'Very well then, you talk! Explain to me what this Barbara Puglisi is like in your eyes; explain to me why in the devil you married her; explain to me what your life with her was like. Oh, saints in heaven and devils in hell! There can only be one truth. If I don't know it you tell it to me. I am open-minded enough to let you correct me if I am wrong.'

'In 1934 I came here from Rome sick and tired of my everlasting lies. I had managed to make people believe that I was the lover of Countess K., of the daughter of an ambassador, of the wife of an inspector of the party. . . .'

'You, too, by God; how you could stand having anything to do with these Fascists is beyond me!'

'Uncle, that thing doesn't belong to any party. The worst thing about it wasn't that the ladies I knew were wives of Fascists; to me that was a matter of little importance. What did matter to me was that I had to be content with play-acting with them, because I was quite incapable of doing what I ought to have to them. If I could have done any better with the wives of anti-Fascists, oh, Uncle, the OVRA, the Fascist Militia and the Lictorean Youth all together couldn't have kept me away from them!'

'But the wives of anti-Fascists are serious-minded women, my dear boy, and they wouldn't have allowed you much rope—what do you think?'

'Bah! If you only knew! . . . But let's leave politics out of it, Uncle. Has one always got to talk politics with you? Politics have nothing to do with my wretched affairs.'

'Very well, very well. Go on with your story. In 1934 you came back from Rome.'

'I came back like a poor beast driven to the slaughter-house; a thousand thoughts danced round my head in the sleeping-car! Rome was the city which had given me the greatest and the only happiness of my life . . . all that I had left was the taste of hot aromatic wine in my mouth, the taste of a wonderful world which I had quaffed with all my senses, and the memory of a celestial moment, which grew ever more celestial as the years passed without it, that moment of fire, honey, paradise. . . .'

'Steady, steady! Actually a moment like any other. . . .'

'Perhaps I exaggerate its importance, as I'm not capable of repeating it. But don't say that it was a moment like any other. . . .'

‘Sometimes a moment worse than any other. But we won’t quarrel about it! Go on with your story!’

‘When I arrived in Catania, my father immediately started talking about the girl he wanted me to marry. You can be sure that the very idea of marriage was as intolerable to me as it was impossible! . . . But one day, as I was standing on the pavement of the Via Etnea—I remember as if it were yesterday—I saw Barbara Puglisi passing by with her mother. . . . Uncle, Uncle, God the Father must have wanted to have an amusing game at my expense! When Barbara came near me, a wave of heat swept me from my feet to my head, and for some time I was glued to the spot; I couldn’t move, I was so embarrassed by the extent of my excitement.’

‘As much as that?’

‘Yes, as much as that. It’s the truth. You know that I am not telling you any lies! That very evening I told my parents that I wanted to marry Barbara. I don’t have to tell you how delighted they were. . . .’

‘What a misfortune! What a great misfortune! But, during your engagement, when you had a chance to be alone together? Surely an odd kiss or a caress was in order; though I must admit that in a house like theirs, full of crucifixes and monks, I wouldn’t even have the courage to sneak off to the lavatory; but didn’t you have an opportunity of observing how things were going with you?’

‘Uncle, in that house full of monks and crucifixes, as you say, in the presence of the notary and his wife, who never took their eyes off us; in that house the women always had their blouses tightly buttoned; the very buttons glared at you like the eyes of a mad dog—and you could be sure that if you dared undo a single one, your

hand would have been bitten, torn and shredded; well, in that house . . .'

'In that house? . . . Get on with it!'

'In that house I was almost always in a state which made me ashamed of myself. . . but no longer a discouraged, gloomy shame, but a proud and happy one. . . . And the fear of being found out was very much like wishing and hoping to be found out; the shivers, aches, dizziness, shooting pains which penetrated my back towards midnight; they seemed to have a sharp point which dug into the depths of my flesh; it was something which sparkled like a diamond and stayed inside me the whole night, to light up my dreams and my blood. . . . Uncle, Uncle, it was happiness again!'

'Very good, very good! Go on!'

'Barbara is the most beautiful woman in the world! After the marriage ceremony, on our wedding night I could not contain myself. When I first saw her arms, her knees and everything else, thinly disguised by her night-dress, when I saw the vivid flush which flooded her cheeks when she realised that, for the first time, she was alone with me, under circumstances of the greatest intimacy . . . You have no idea, Uncle, how exciting such a pure soul can be! . . .'

'Very well, exciting. Perhaps! And then?'

'And then, Uncle, the same thing happened to me, which had happened five years before with Ingeborg.'

'Incredible!'

'It was so, Uncle.'

'Exactly as it had been five years ago?'

'No, not exactly. This time it was not as if a cold frost had entered my body; it was rather as if everything was evaporating and going up in smoke, at the crucial

moment; as if my flesh, with my blood and nerves, after reaching a sort of boiling point, suddenly dissolved in sweat and a cloudy mistiness.'

'And so, my poor son, this time, too? . . . But, tell me, why didn't you at once run for shelter?'

'In what way, for shelter?'

'Separate immediately from your wife, before she noticed anything. You should have taken the initiative, my boy!'

'How?'

'You could have run off with a nice buxom country wench or with a woman from one of the brothels!'

'Out of the question! In any case, I was living quite happily with Barbara. I was still full of hope; I was passing through the gamut of new and most peculiar sensations; all pleasurable and some that brought me to the verge of rapture.'

'I don't understand!'

'Barbara was not Ingeborg. That experience was a terrifying one; I was so frightened that if I had ever caught sight of her again I should certainly have fainted dead away, as if I had seen my own corpse walking towards me with its eyes shut. But with Barbara it was very different. On a moral level, I admired her immensely, even to the extent of respecting all the churches she had visited before our marriage. But as to her attitude towards the opposite sex she was just like a sheet of blank paper. She knew nothing and asked nothing; she was blushing almost continuously when we were alone together. When I kissed her she nestled up close to me as if she expected me to protect her from the thing which I was about to reveal to her. Like a stubborn child she persisted in turning her back on the truth, which she

knew nothing about. Uncle, try and understand; as I was not capable of enlightening her, I deluded myself that I was behaving as I did because Barbara wanted me to. On the other hand, when we were in bed together I wasn't cold or frightened nor even the slightest bit disgusted. I was intensely excited; my blood and my brain boiled; but, in the end, it all evaporated through the pores of my skin; this process was an extremely pleasurable one and left me completely exhausted like a boy before his first real experience with women.'

'All very nice and pleasant, certainly, nice and pleasant . . . but for a day, a week, a month! Not for three years!'

'Uncle, I kept on hoping that something would happen. I got more and more excited all the time; like an engine that is revving up, makes more and more noise, but just can't manage to get the car moving.'

'And then?'

'I got still more excited, and, oh, I was as happy as a sand boy! When I was alone and thought of Barbara I felt the first suspicion, the first real stirrings. Uncle, just imagine the situation. There I was, left alone every night with that divinely beautiful girl; when she climbed into my bed, every night her blushes became more violent; for hours she lay with her flushed face pressed against the pillow. . . . Uncle, what could I do? That girl made my head spin. . . . Finally, she became so restless and her state of agitation became so obvious that her maid, a stupid woman whom we had to sack, took it upon herself to enlighten her as to the facts.'

'What? You knew, all the time, that Barbara had been told?'

'After her talk with the maid, I took my courage in

both hands and told her my whole wretched story, in the greatest detail, just as I have to you, Uncle; then I asked her if she wanted to go on living with me or if she would prefer a separation.

‘And she?’

‘She threw her arms around my neck and gave me such a passionate kiss that I shall never be able to forget it. She insisted upon our continuing to live together, close and intertwined like two angels. But, at night when she came to bed, her face was more scarlet than ever and I could see how her heart was beating from the fluttering of the ribbons around her breasts. She usually lay with her head pressed down into the pillow, as I have described to you but, every now and then, she would lift her head and give me such a look of passionate longing, of curiosity and happy expectation that I really began to believe in a repetition of the miracle of 1930. Then, all of a sudden, her father, her mother and she herself . . . I still don’t understand just why . . .’

‘No, no, no! I forbid you to say anything more! You know why, perfectly well! We all know! I have been patient and allowed you to go on talking. But at this point . . . Enough! I don’t want you to think me even more of a fool than I really am! . . . You know why Barbara decided to cut the cord, just as well as I do! All the time that you were painting such a beautiful verbal picture of your wife I was thinking: Very well, beautiful, chaste, innocent, etc. etc., but how does he fit the mean, cold and calculating qualities, which she has inherited from her family, into his picture? You surely won’t have the nerve to deny that she’s a mercenary girl, who knows only too well how to look after her own material interests, who would sacrifice anything and everybody if it

meant getting her hands on more money, more goods, a position of greater power or prestige.'

'Uncle, you're wasting your breath! Of course Barbara is mercenary; she has a first-class head on her shoulders. . . . But that side of her appeals to me just as much as the other!'

'Bah! Very well, then, don't let's waste time! But explain this to me: that woman promises to live with you like a cherub with a seraph, happy and close as two fingers stuck together in a honey-pot, hugs you, slobbers over you, dotes on you with her eyes all night long, and then, bang, out of the blue, she kicks you out of the house like a mangy dog? . . .'

'Uncle, please! No one kicked me out. I went entirely of my own accord. There was no sudden decision, as you suggest. Barbara is a true Catholic, honest and scrupulous, not a hypocrite who preaches one thing and practises another. When she made that promise to me she didn't know that the Church considered our marriage null and void; she hadn't talked to the Archbishop of Catania. . . .'

'Imbecile, cretin, imbecile! A baby in swaddling clothes wouldn't be such a sucker as you have been! Archbishop, Church! . . . Why don't you say the Duke of Bronte, the Duke of Bronte, the Duke of Bronte with his fat buttocks bulging like a bloated abbess and all that land at Piana!'

'What does all that matter? I love Barbara, I have always been in love with her, and if I don't see her again soon I think I'll go mad!'

'Very well then, go and crawl to her, ask her to take pity on you and let you stay in the kitchen like a she-cat to keep the mice away!'

'You don't understand me, Uncle!'

'What, I don't understand you? It is just because I do understand you that I lost my temper and called you all those names!'

'I would never go back to Barbara, even if she came right up to our front door, with her tongue hanging out of her mouth like a thirsty bitch, with all Catania looking on! I am in love with her, madly in love with her! Behind her back I would kiss the ground she walks on, but this mouth of mine which is talking to you will never again pronounce the name of Barbara.'

'That's better! Very well, excellent! Now you're talking like a man! Those scoundrels mustn't be allowed to crow at our expense, that's absolutely vital! . . . But there's a fly in the ointment, a devilish big fly! What can I say to your father? The poor man has got a very different version of the facts firmly fixed in his head. If I tell him that . . . What riles me is that tomorrow everybody in Catania will be rinsing his mouth out with our affairs. They won't believe that a member of our family—a family whose men have spent most of their time cuckolding their neighbours and, thank God, have never been cuckolded themselves—they simply won't believe that one of us . . . Very well, what's to be done? Nothing can be done about this sort of thing. . . . On the other hand, worse things could happen. . . . I had almost forgotten my own troubles. . . . How I would love to make a present to Notary Puglisi; present him with the dog that's always gnawing away at me inside this miserable cage of skin and bones which people call a chest! Good heavens, its half-past seven! Your parents will be back at any moment. What shall I say? I can't lie to them. And I can't tell them the truth. . . . I haven't the courage

to say to your father . . . still less to your mother . . . I know my sister; she seems like a granite wall, but actually she crumbles when you touch her. On the other hand, I haven't the nerve to hide from Alfio . . . or to just talk about something else?'

Signor Alfio, Signora Rosaria and the maid came home just before eight. The old man, exhausted by the effort of climbing the stairs and by his long walk, sank wearily into a chair and dismissed the maid with a tired wave of the hand.

Signora Rosaria also went to her bedroom, ostensibly to take off her hat.

There was a long silence.

Ermenegildo, when he looked across the table at the old man whose tired body seemed drained not only of all vitality, but even of the power of speech, grew so enraged that he became quite incapable of using tact and prudence with this victim of fate.

'Alfio, I had better tell you the truth! Turn over a new page and forget all about that devil of a Barbara!'

Signor Alfio made a hard and prolonged effort to open his lips, then he laid his hands, palms upwards, on the table, as if to say, 'I have never thought of Barbara, I'm only thinking about my son.'

There was another, still longer, silence.

Suddenly Signor Alfio stiffened; there was a faint almost subterranean rumble. Gradually this increased in volume and finally a groan burst from his lips.

'The truth!'

'The truth is that Antonio hasn't been any too well lately.'

'All I want to know is whether he did it on purpose or not?'

'No, he didn't, Alfio. Why should he carry on a stupid farce like that for three years?'

'What's the explanation then?'

'He couldn't help himself. Barbara appeals to him. . . . But, with her, he just couldn't manage to steer his boat into port.'

'Things like that happen in the other world, not in this! That young man has spent more time sleeping with women than at any other occupation! You'd think that if it was only to please me and his mother he'd be willing to show that Barbara woman what a Magnano can do when he wants to. . . . Do you mean that a strapping, tall fellow like him hasn't the guts to do anything at all to her? But one thing he must do, by God, or I'll never speak to him again! He must take a mistress, two, three, four mistresses, immediately! I'll sell the garden, the house, the coat off my back; I'll give him all the money he wants, but he must have four mistresses! . . . Don't you agree with me? What's the alternative? Fold our arms like so many Christs and invite all the passers-by to spit on us? We'll become the city sewer. Shall we let them shit in our mouths?'

'I don't say that.'

'Well, what do you say? Out with it!'

'I say it is better not to add fuel to the fire.'

'Why? What's your reason? How does my son's having four mistresses add fuel to a fire? What fuel? After what those swine have done to him, isn't he at liberty to take an open carriage and parade a whole brothelful of women if he likes? Who's to stop him?'

'Alfio, do what you like! Give him four mistresses, a hundred mistresses! But I, for my part, don't advise you to.'

‘And why?’

‘If I were Antonio I’d leave Catania and go abroad.’

‘And why?’

‘For at least a year I would like to be so far away that I could forget all the women in the world!’

‘And why?’

‘Alfio, I’m sorry, but you must face it! Supposing that what happened with Barbara happens with another woman? What would we do? All we could do would be to tie stones around our necks, all of us, and go to the harbour and chuck ourselves into the sea!’

Signor Alfio managed to brandish one hand in his brother-in-law’s face and moaned. He was searching desperately in his mind for a word, the word Ermenegildo.

‘What the hell’s your name?’ he shouted.

Ermenegildo felt as if a brick had flattened his brain and was terrified that he had forgotten his own name; he was equally anxious to answer quickly; he was also still in a rage about the whole business. These mixed emotions made him incapable of coherent speech. He stuttered a few disconnected syllables, passing and repassing, very near to the word Ermenegildo, but just missing it each time.

‘I asked you what your name was?’

His brother-in-law did not reply.

‘A fine kettle of fish when you don’t even know your own name!’

‘Ermenegildo, Ermenegildo!’ the final burst was almost like an explosion.

‘Ermenegildo, what did you mean a little while ago when you said that it might—what is the word?—to my son?’

Ermenegildo wasn’t able to help him.

'What is the word? What is the word?'

Ermenegildo kept his lips tightly closed.

'... happen! that's the word! That the same thing might happen to my son with other women which happened to him with his wife. . . . What did you mean?'

'I meant that it was better not to pull too hard on the rope, especially when the rope isn't very strong.' He chose his words very carefully and spoke very slowly for fear of losing his memory again.

'Is not very strong. . . . What do you mean by that?'

'I mean that Antonio ought to have a rest for a few years!'

Signor Alfio fished a large handkerchief from his trouser pocket, half opened it, and put it in front of his mouth as if he were going to spit something disgusting into it.

'What a disgrace!'

He then carefully refolded his handkerchief and put it back in his pocket.

'A few years, you say, but I am so old that they'll soon be able to pick me up with a spoon. Must I spend the last years of my life brooding over the fact that neither I nor my son have got enough primal urge to sleep with a woman? Why, at his age he ought to be able to lift stone blocks with it.'

'And so he will; he'll lift them after he's had a rest.'

'What's the use of talking? Come, come! Let's be true Christians and resign ourselves to our fate. And don't let's talk about it any more! It just means that I have no son! He died! I had a son, but he died!'

His voice did not falter, nor did there seem to be tears in his eyes, but his furrowed cheeks were inundated with

tears. They coalesced and ran down on to his collar like great beads of sweat.

'I had a son, but he died! He died!'

The old man struck the table with his fist. He then tried to push himself to his feet, using his knuckles on the table as a lever, but he felt as though he had no knees inside his trousers and had to sit down again.

'I had a son up to yesterday; I had a son who was the pride of my life; I worshipped him and everybody envied me and that woman . . . what was her name? Help me, Ermenegildo!'

'Who? the, the . . . Oh blessed Madonna!'

'She was a relative of Mussolini!'

'Well, don't worry! You know who I mean. The wife of that fellow . . .'

'The Countess K.!' burst out Ermenegildo, enormously relieved.

'That's right, the Countess K. That woman spent her time scratching at his door! And why do you suppose that he wouldn't let her in?'

Ermenegildo stared at Signor Alfio.

Signor Alfio stared back. As he did so a black cloud seemed to close down on his brain.

'Because . . .' His voice died away. He had not had time to do any conscious thinking, to hazard even a guess at the truth, but he murmured, 'Oh, my God!' as nebulous suspicion filtered through into his subconscious mind. He was filled with a nameless and fathomless terror and he felt as if he were about to faint. 'Call my wife, immediately! . . . imm . . .'

Ermenegildo shot from his chair and rushed into the bedroom. As he ran he felt as if his memory was going again. He took his sister by the arm.

**'Come on, hurry, he needs you !' he said.**

**'Who?' asked the signora, frightened out of her wits.**

**The name Alfio sounded quite clear in his head, but he was afraid that it might get lost somewhere between his brain and his tongue, so he prudently contented himself with saying :**

**'Your husband !'**

## CHAPTER X

'Like the roar of a cannon. . . .'  
*The Barber of Seville*

'He acts like a free man and talks like a slave.'

VOLTAIRE

THE SCANDAL REVERBERATED throughout Catania as if Mount Etna had started rumbling and belching into activity.

Antonio Magnano, the son of Alfio, that beautiful young man who made any girl, however devout, raise her eyes from her prayer book, Antonio with the smouldering eyes, did not everybody know him? (They raised their hands above their heads to indicate that he was tall and stroked their cheeks caressingly to show that he had a lovely face.) Antonio. Yes. He and nobody else. Well . . . Antonio and his wife . . . nothing! I tell you, nothing! Absolutely nothing! Barbara Puglisi, after three years of married life, still doesn't know what the grace of God means.

'And in those three years, what was the husband doing?'

'Chasing the flies off her.'

'Is that possible?'

'It's the truth!'

'Is it possible that a son of Alfio's has no teeth for fresh bread?'

'No, he just hasn't.'

'But what are you saying? Are you trying to pull my leg?'

'May I be struck blind, if I'm not telling you God's own truth! On their wedding night they went to bed and . . . and . . . nothing!'

'But what happened?'

'What happened? Why ask me? I wasn't there, chum.'

'Locked all night?'

'Locked tight as a padlock, chum!'

'Locked for all of three years?'

'Locked all the time.'

'Locked every night?'

'Every night!'

'How's that possible?'

'Ask our Eternal Father in heaven. He's the only one who does these things.'

'I could understand, once or twice, three times . . . I'll raise the odds and say five times! We've all been locked a time or two.'

'You speak for yourself. That's never happened to me in the whole of my life. Not once!'

'Not once?'

'Never!'

'Well, I haven't really been locked good and tight. I've gone off half-cocked as you might say.'

'I hope the Lord would strike me dead before he sent me a bit of bad luck like that! What a life, eh? I'd rather throw myself into the well.'

'And what does he think he's got to live for now?'

'Better dead, isn't he?'

'Better dead a thousand times!'

'A thousand times? I say a thousand million times.'

'D'you think I'd go walking round like that? Give me

the bottom of the sea and the fishes nibbling at me, any day. . . . I tell you I'd rather be locked up and with chains on my hands and feet like Jesus Christ himself. Anyway, if I'd murdered somebody and I was rotting in prison I wouldn't have to be ashamed of myself. Not like him. Then if my friends started to laugh and nudge each other I could challenge them to bring on their wives and sisters and see who would be laughing then. I'd soon make them laugh on the other sides of their faces.'

'You'd be popular all right. Father, Son and Holy Ghost! If I had a limp fish like that flopping in front of me I'd hack it off and feed it to my dog! What did our Lord say? If your limb offends you, pluck it off and throw it away.'

'Quite right, too. But it isn't everyone who'd have the guts to do it.'

'I would all right! But it beats me that a son of Alfio can put up with it and not go raving mad!'

'Not a chance. If he was going to do anything, he'd have done it a long time ago. These young gentlemen haven't the guts!'

'Give him a chance. Wait and see!'

'Not for my money! What I'd like to know is whether he was always like that or whether he got that way only after he was married?'

'How should I know?'

'I've heard that in Rome he had so many women that you couldn't count them and that even here in Catania he couldn't hold himself in if he didn't have a girl every five minutes!'

Less humble folk were equally scathing:

'Late one evening I was sitting in a café and he was sitting at the next table with his friend, the one they've

made mayor. If I heard the mayor say it once I heard him say it ten times: "What shall we do, Nino? Shall we go and blow our noses again?"

'I grant you that the mayor knows how to blow his nose! Have you seen the gorgeous bits of stuff he's taken on as typists at the City Hall? . . . As for Alfio's boy, that's another kettle of fish altogether; could you swear that he really did manage to blow his nose that night?'

'What I can swear is that, late—it was after eleven—I heard him say, "Yes, let's go and blow our noses!"'

'But, my friend, it's one thing to talk and another thing to do it. Were you there, actually in the bed, when he tried to blow his nose? How can you know what really happened? It's dark in bed and who can be sure of what happens?'

'But, Christ, the woman would talk!'

'Not necessarily. I know a man who stumped up a hell of a lot of money to make sure that the woman kept her mouth shut.'

'Is that what you think Alfio's son did?'

'I'm not claiming anything, my friend. It's all one to me whether he does it or not! That's his business! I couldn't very well give him a helping hand. That's to say . . . if he'd asked me to on his wedding night I'd have gladly come to the rescue!'

'That would have been like falling off a log! That girl's a real knockout, I can tell you!'

Conversations of this sort went on, all over the city. They all ended up in the same way. Mouths began to water; lecherous smiles culminated in a gush of saliva. Then the belly slapping and the shoulder thumping began; a crescendo of ribaldry was reached when a

respectable County Court Judge was propelled, by a resounding thump on the back, towards the door of a notorious house, closed down for the night. The worthy judge started hammering on the door with his cane, as if he were banging a big drum.

But all this was as nothing compared with the effect which the news had on Antonio's friends. It was as if they had been struck by both thunder and lightning.

These thirty-year-olds were not good dissemblers; for a few days the sight of their pale and worried faces gave great pleasure to the more malicious among their acquaintances. They felt that the honour of the whole company had been impugned; in their anxiety to redeem it, it is to be feared that some of them overstepped the mark, to the extent even of involving the wives of their relatives.

Luigi d'Agata's motto was 'I pass up no one! A woman left is a woman lost!'

'What? Even your uncle's wife? ...'

'Bread or cake, it's all the same to me; it doesn't bother me!'

'But she's the wife of your uncle!'

'No matter, why should I listen to reason? Where I find, I take! Is it my fault?'

'But, after all, you must have some consideration. ...'

'I've no consideration for anybody. Now if, er, we stand on ceremony, unscrupulous competitors will jump our claims! First come first served! All I know is that from now on, if a woman comes my way, I don't care a damn whose daughter or whose wife she is. Has she got a skirt? That's all I want to know!'

'But if you carry that line to its logical conclusion, where are you going to end up?'

'One over and one under.'

'And if somebody did the same to you, what would you say?'

'I'm not married.'

'But you've got a mother and a sister. . . .'

'Don't talk about my mother and my sister! They don't come into this sort of conversation!'

'But they're women, aren't they?'

'I told you that they don't come into this sort of conversation! Is that clear? Or do I have to take this table and pull one of its legs off?'

'Is that your way of arguing?'

'Yes, it is! If somebody doesn't like my way of arguing, let him lump it . . . before I beat it into his thick skull with a table leg.'

'That's enough! Let's change the subject!'

They all sat in silence for a while. There was an ominous frown on all their faces.

But the one who touched the lowest depths of dejection was Edoardo Lentini. Hatred for Hitler and sorrow for his cousin had made him the most depressed man in all Sicily.

'Mayor,' would exclaim some passer-by who had recognised him and raised his hand obsequiously in the Fascist salute, 'my most humble respects!'

'Good night,' Edoardo would answer, and follow it up immediately with 'The same to your sister!' to cap the 'Son of a dog!' or 'May you and the man who appointed you mayor both die of slow poisoning!' which the man would certainly have said to himself, directly after saluting him with such abject respect. Edoardo would turn and give him a friendly glance as he went off among the trees because he liked everybody who in-

sulted him in his capacity of the representative of a government which he despised.

But his real obsession was Hitler's face. With its hyena moustache, even a lion-tamer couldn't have managed to teach it to smile. A visual image of that face was always with him and made him squirm with uncontrollable rage, to the point of making him spit on the floor of a drawing-room, to the consternation of the ladies, whose admiration he had hitherto retained because of his impeccable manners.

Just after Hitler had asked for the return of the Sudeten-Land to Germany, on the fifth of August there was a meeting of the Fascist Federal Council; the Federal Secretary, Pietro Capàno, hammered on the table to rally his miserable crew of inspectors, whose ranks had been swelled, either because of vanity, prudence or self-interest, by so many simple and apolitical citizens; Edoardo asked for the floor and announced that there would be no war.

Edoardo's pallor made the Federal Secretary suspicious.

'What makes you say that there won't be a war?'

Edoardo's pallor became accentuated; it gave him intense pleasure to risk his whole future and to be able, at last, to give vent to his secret sentiments.

'Hitler barks, but he doesn't bite. Like all men who have lost their virility.'

Pietro Capàno felt his head spin with fright at hearing such words.

'But . . . what? . . . What are you saying?'

'It's not his fault if he's in that condition.' On the contrary, it's his badge of valour as a fighting soldier. You know as well as I do, Mr. Federal Secretary, that in the

last war a cloud of gas struck Hitler and burnt his . . . well, what it did burn !'

'I know nothing about that ! Absolutely nothing about it !'

'Come, Mr. Secretary, everybody knew about it !'

'Really,' interrupted an ingenuous inspector, 'I must confess that even I did not know that Hitler had been affected by gas in that part of his anatomy ! Judging from his conduct, however, I should have said that he was certainly not a man without virility. On the contrary, I should have thought that he's the kind of man who's so virile that women are in danger even when they look at him.

'Certainly,' shouted Capàno, 'he's so wonderfully virile that women fall in love even with his photograph. All the men in his family are the same. In any case, he has no relative who, to my knowledge, has been repudiated by his wife !'

The allusion to Antonio was only too obvious. Edoardo got to his feet, with part of his face as red as fire and the other half still pale.

'I repeat that Hitler lost his virility in the last war !'

At first the Secretary was too angry to answer; he clutched at the edge of the table with both hands, lifted it violently, banged it down again and said: 'If that's what you think, your duty is clear !'

'What?'

'Not to go on serving a government led by men without virility, you who have your virility and whose relatives are so abundantly provided with virility !'

'Leave my relatives out of it ! Leave them out of it ! Besides, I refute your insinuations with the greatest indignation. I am not serving the Nazi Government, but

the Fascist Government, which has at its head a man with magnificent superhuman vitality !

‘But you ought to know that the Duce and Hitler love each other like brothers and that to insult one of them is to insult the other !’

‘I quite understand, Mr. Secretary. What you want me to do is to resign ! Very well, I resign ! I resign ! I resign !’

With that Edoardo picked up his beret with its golden eagle and fitted it carefully on his head in front of a mirror, pretending to have a long look at himself, but really to give himself time to regain his composure; he then saluted the Secretary and the company with a bow, worthy of a Roman senator, and stalked out of the room.

When he arrived home he told his wife what had happened.

The signora’s answer was to ask him : ‘Can I still use the municipal car or must I take a taxi ?’

‘Use the car by all means ! Until my successor has been appointed I am still the Mayor of Catania !’

After he had dined in silence with his wife and his five children, he sat down at his desk and composed the following letter to Count K. :

‘Excellency,

‘I hasten to inform you of an episode which occurred today at the headquarters of the Fascist Federation; during the session I behaved with unfortunate lack of restraint. In the course of a discussion on foreign policy, of which you are, etc. etc., I was perhaps too much carried away by that sentiment of jealous admiration which I cherish for our CHIEF.

‘As you know, it is impossible for me to consider the Führer of equal moral and intellectual stature to our DUCE. Whenever I detect an implication of this sort,

however veiled, in the remarks of others I lose all control of myself and react with violence.

‘Today it was my impression that the local heads of our party had agreed among themselves, with singular ingenuousness, to consider Hitler as the principal protagonist of the events which the world is now witnessing. I say ingenuously because my comrades of Catania are bound together by the most profound devotion to our DUCÉ, to you and to his Majesty the King Emperor. But their ingenuousness wounded me equally profoundly. Your Excellency, I was unable to keep my temper and I openly recalled to their memories the mutilation to which the present leader of Germany fell a victim in the last war, during which, may I remind you, our own glorious troops distinguished themselves with such signal valour—a mutilation which may have been glorious in itself, but which puts Hitler even physically on a lower plane than our revered DUCÉ.

‘I must not say that the Federal Secretary denied that the stature of the two men was very different, but he defended Hitler with excessive heat, and finally, at a later point in the discussion, used violent words which insulted my own family.

‘Excellency, I accuse no one! I will say to you further: I excuse all and accuse only myself.

‘Thinking back over the exact words used in and the development of this dispute, I have been forced to realise that my nerves are in a state of tension bordering on exhaustion; I have become so ultra-sensitive regarding the slightest aspersion, however indirect, cast upon my beloved DUCÉ that I do not feel justified in continuing to serve HIM at a juncture at which HE has considered it expedient to raise to his own level another leader who does not even reach to his knees, but with whom, he has declared, he will march to the end.

‘For these reasons I have the temerity to plead with you to accept my resignation as Mayor of Catania, which I submit to your Excellency, before submitting it to the Home Secretary. I beg of you to consider me always the most grateful and devoted servant of the Duce and your exalted self.

‘With the most humble and cordial Fascist greetings, etc. etc.’

This letter made a very favourable impression on Edoardo’s relatives. The way in which he related the facts was the only one which might save him from expulsion from the party and even, perhaps, from prison. But when he had dropped it into the letter-box he was overwhelmed by a mood of black depression.

‘What an ignominious mountebank I am! If I had only had the courage to write the truth! Why show my repugnance for Hitler and then, blithely, swallow my loathing for the other fellow?’ he muttered to himself.

Still grumbling in an undertone he paced the deserted streets far into the night. At dawn the next day, he felt like writing a very different letter to Count K.: ‘Dear Sir, You will doubtless have inferred that my previous letter was to be understood as an expression of stupid expediency. But, to avoid any possible misunderstanding let me tell you, explicitly, the true reason which induced me to resign from my post as Mayor of Catania: Fascism, the Duce, the Führer and you, too, Count, bore me so unutterably that I have finally found the courage not to put up with it all any more. For years I lacked the courage, because the very air we breathe contaminates us with patience and lies; for years I have paraded my mayor’s uniform, and people catching sight of me under

the golden eagle through the windows of the municipal car greeted me, publicly, with the most abject obsequiousness and went home to cover me, privately, with ridicule, at no risk to themselves. That painful period of my life is now over. He who writes to you is no longer afraid to address you simply as Dear Sir, etc. etc. . . .

At this point he was deafened by the lamentations of his poor wife and children. No, such a letter would be a futile gesture; no paper would publish it, nobody would believe that he had actually sent it. He would only be thrown into prison, accused of having demanded a bribe of three hundred thousand lire for awarding the contract for the construction of a new street! . . .

Even before he received Count K.'s answer to the letter he thought of himself as a private citizen and no longer went to the City Hall. His answer to his secretaries when they telephoned to his house was invariably:

'I am no longer the mayor.'

'But, Mayor . . .'

'I am no longer mayor, I tell you!'

'To me you will always be the mayor.'

'I forbid you to think of me as the mayor!'

'But, Mr. Mayor . . .'

To cook his goose even more thoroughly he began to frequent the office of the Socialist lawyer Raimondo Bonaccorsi, the leader of a group of people, all distinguished by the fact that they were not allowed to hold a party card and whose thumbprints were on record at the Questura.

The lawyer was a man who, outside of committees or in a court of law, always spoke in a low tone of voice, as if he were destined from birth to be in opposition to a

government which had ears everywhere. He was the gentlest and least decisive of men, but dominated his audiences by his erudition and a sort of old-fashioned eloquence; before saying yes or no he would stroke his beard with great deliberation and would imply that the easy and obvious reasons which his impatient friends put forward were fallacious; there were others, far more cogent, outside the range of the papers and books which they had read, only to be found in old periodicals and rare books, in backwaters of culture as remote as they were inaccessible to ordinary minds.

That first evening Edoardo had a cool reception. Quite naturally, they were all a bit doubtful! But, three days later, they had taken him to their hearts.

An endless series of disappointments had reduced these veteran anti-Fascists to a sorry state. The habit of failure had become ingrained, with the result that they had become hopelessly embittered. This applied to the lawyer, their host, even more than to the others. It was said of him that he had become so attached to his gloom and depression that he would have preferred to forgo the delights of victory rather than the inverted pleasures of frustration.

The lawyer's office was a spiritless place when Edoardo burst into it with his invincible optimism and his implacable certainty that the Government he hated would soon be swept away.

These meetings were not only attended by ex-deputies belonging to the Socialist and other democratic parties; there was also the ex-brigand Don Luigi Compagnoni who was haunted by the fear of being taken for a coward. By a peculiar coincidence his career as an honest and law-abiding citizen had begun in 1925, the very year

in which the dictatorship was succeeding in crushing all strength of character, whether for good or evil. He feared that his exemplary conduct since then might be construed as a sign of cowardice. At bottom he bitterly regretted the good old swashbuckling days and had joined the movement in the hope of an armed insurrection. Then he would be able to whip out his knife again and show what he was made of. But ever since the successful outcome of the Ethiopian war an atmosphere of unmitigated despondency had settled on the conspirators. Instead of kindling a fire of hope in his fireplace, it might be said that the lawyer had stacked it with slabs of ice. Only two of them made any attempt to rebel against this inertia born of despair: the good bandit Compagnoni and a lawyer, Pasqualino Cannavò. This young man had a passion for singing modern popular songs and, up to 1936, had been a fanatical Fascist. In that year he had been fighting, as a volunteer, in Africa, singing 'Faccetta nera', but as the authorities had promptly banned that song, he had entered Addis Ababa in sulky silence. It was then that he first suspected that freedom under Fascism was an illusion. Three months later this suspicion had become certainty and prevented him from sleeping. In 1937 he was sent to prison for two months. On his return to Catania he became an habitu  of Bonaccorsi's office, but a life of unaccustomed inactivity affected his liver so much that he was obliged to take the cure at Chianciano every summer.

To these two, the arrival of Edoardo seemed to herald the dawn of a new day. The office rang with shouts, pounding on the table and Neapolitan songs; even the old veterans began to thaw and gingerly fluttered their wings.

'They won't go to war!' shouted Edoardo. 'I'll stake my life that they won't!' •

'Do you mind telling me why?' asked Lawyer Bonaccorsi.

'Because they're shaking in their skins, both of them.' 'I doubt it.'

'And you, sir,' stormed Don Luigi Compagnoni, 'prefer things as they are, I suppose. . . .'

One evening their host took Edoardo aside and said to him in a very low voice:

'I think you ought to know that ugly rumours are being circulated about you at the Palazzo dei Vaccarini.'

'Do you think that an honest man should attach any importance to what they say at the Federation?'

'They say that you resigned your office as mayor simply because, at some assembly or meeting, the Secretary alluded to the affair of your cousin Antonio Magnano.'

'My dear sir, no one can believe a word they say. Surely the reason why the word "believe" is inscribed on their party card is because everything they say, without exception, is not to be believed. In any case, let me tell you that the incident in question was provoked by me; I declared openly, in front of all the inspectors, that Hitler had his b—s burnt off by gas!'

'Did you really say that at a Federation meeting?' shouted Don Luigi. 'I must embrace you again!'

'Yes, I said it, not once but several times! But, pardon my curiosity, sir, who reported this to you?'

'Lawyer Targoni, who is an excellent fellow.'

'An inspector of the party?' exclaimed Pasqualino Cannavò. 'And you, sir, surely you could not believe an inspector of the party?'

'He's an honourable man, who has always treated me with the greatest courtesy!'

'Sir, I am astonished at you! There is no such thing as an honourable man in that quarter.'

'My friends, I was brought up in a very different period of history: in my time, political passions did not prevent us from recognising virtue, even in the person of an adversary.'

'Those people aren't adversaries, but pirates, who want to treat us like slaves! I refuse to recognise any good qualities in that riff-raff! I refuse to believe that there is a single honest person among them!'

'There can be but one explanation for this violent attitude of yours. You are still a Fascist!'

It was as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown on the only log burning in the fireplace and the office again became as cold as a morgue.

'If that is what you think, I will remove my offensive person at once.'

Edoardo walked out. The others were too dumbfounded to protest, but Lawyer Bonaccorsi had regretted his hasty remark as soon as he had uttered it. He now stammered his apologies, tried, unsuccessfully, to stop Edoardo from leaving the room, and then trotted to the landing and called out further apologies and appeals over the banisters, to all of which Edoardo turned a deaf ear.

A cloud of the blackest depression settled over the office; they were all convinced that the young man would never return.

Fortunately for them, two days later, Ermenegildo Fasanaro turned up at the office.

They all sat down in a circle around him.

'A real old anti-Fascist, eh? A veteran tried and proved!' said Bonaccorsi, clapping him on the back and nodding to the others.

'I am no longer either an anti-Fascist or a Fascist!'

'What, what? You must be one or the other!'

'Where is it written?'

'Well, nowhere, of course . . . but then, excuse me, what party do you belong to?'

'I belong to the party of the worms who will shortly feed on my flesh. Or if you prefer me to put it in another way: it is my own belief or rather a conviction which I have conceived inside my own skull, which will certainly outlast both Fascism and anti-Fascism by many a century.'

Ermenegildo's words met with an embarrassed silence. They changed the subject and begged their guest to use all his authority to convince Edoardo that Lawyer Bonaccorsi was really incapable of insulting anyone, much less Edoardo, whom he esteemed, respected and admired, etc.

Ermenegildo promised to do his best, and kept his promise the next day. This was the first meeting between Edoardo and a member of the Magnano family since the 'affair'; until then Edoardo had been very careful to avoid them.

They dismissed the Bonaccorsi incident in a few words. Edoardo assured Ermenegildo that it was a closed incident as far as he was concerned, and that he proposed to forget all about it; they then reverted to the engrossing topic of Antonio's disgrace. When reproached by the elder man for abandoning his cousin, Edoardo promised to pay him a visit that same evening.

He found Antonio in the Magnano dining-room reading a book.

The two cousins sat opposite each other in silence. Then Edoardo reached for Antonio's hand and gave it a long, hard squeeze.

'Edoardo, Edoardo, come here!'

It was Signor Alfio calling from his bedroom, to which he had been confined for a week with a temperature.

Edoardo was almost asphyxiated by a dense cloud of pipe smoke in the room and was warmly embraced by Signora Rosaria; then Signor Alfio's hot hand pushed him down into a chair by the bedside.

'So, the son of Nello Capàno permits himself the luxury of insulting us, just because they stuck his bottom in the Federal Secretary's chair! Who does he think he is? Where does he keep his so-called brain? The moment he can lift his miserable old bones out of bed, Alfio Magnano will get to him, even if he tries to hide under the beret of the Eternal Father himself, and will stick these fingers right into his shifty eyes!'

'Keep calm!' remonstrated his wife. 'If you excite yourself your temperature will go up instead of down.'

'You must do me a favour, you must persuade Antonio to write to Count K. and ask him to dismiss that son of a sewer pipe, if that isn't describing his father Nello in too flattering terms! Take my pen and give it to your cousin. Do it right away and come back with the letter! If you don't, so help me God, I'll throw off these sheets and walk up and down the balcony stark naked. Here's the pen, off with you!'

To please the old man Antonio wrote a long letter to Count K.

Unfortunately the letter reached Rome only two days after the news of his disgrace, which had been greeted with enormous guffaws of laughter.

Speaking to the count, Vincenzo Calderara, Vice-Secretary of the party, said: 'I thought, and I wrote to you, that Antonio Magnano did not have the makings of a true Fascist. But, Excellency, did he not take you into his confidence?'

'Why should he have confided in me?'

'He always boasted of your friendship for him.'

'We met at a reception of the R. . . . He came to my house three times—no, twice. . . . I invited him to lunch on one occasion. . . . In my opinion these few meetings do not constitute proof of a friendship.'

'If you listened to his father, you would think that you and he shared . . .'

The count rose to his feet to show his annoyance, interrupting Calderara in the middle of his sentence. The next day he dictated the following letter to his secretary:

'Dear Comrade,

'His Excellency the Count K. instructs me to remind you that ordinary members of the party are at liberty to report any complaints as to their superiors only to the local party headquarters, that is to say, through the established channels. With Fascist salutations. . . .'

At the same time orders were issued to Federal Secretary Capàno to publish a notice in the Catania paper that Comrade Edoardo Lentini had been deprived of his party membership card on the grounds of lack of adequate respect for the party and to relieve him officially of his office.

The news was kept from Signor Alfio, so as not to retard his recovery. But the first time he went out, he returned after half an hour, white as a turnip. He had been told—in the most brutal fashion. Besides, he had

heard from Lawyer Ardizzone that the Duke of Bronte, through the good offices of a party bigwig, who was an intimate friend of a very influential prelate in the Vatican, had been able to arrange an early annulment of Barbara's marriage.

This was more than enough to put the old man back to bed; he was very feverish and became delirious; while he was unconscious it was considered expedient to replace his doctor, who was high up in the party, by an old masonic doctor; this was done because Signor Alfio, in his delirium, spouted imprecations against Capàno, Calderara, Count K. and the whole Government to whom he attributed all his misfortunes.

It was also for this reason that when he first started to feel better he found seated around his bed all the friends of Lawyer Bonaccorsi, the ex-bandit Compagnoni, Pasqualino Cannavò, chemist Cacciola, Professor Rapisardi, Engineer Marletti, the navvy Speranza and Lawyer Bonaccorsi in person.

Signor Alfio felt that he had neglected these old friends. He had been too busy following up his son, who had formed all sorts of friendships with those of the newer generation, who had pushed themselves into prominence and power. With tears in his eyes, he insisted upon embracing each one of them.

To Compagnoni he said: 'You, Don Luigino, I see, haven't lost the habit of forgetting to button your trousers!'

The good bandit looked at Signora Rosaria and blushed like a schoolboy.

'And how is your son?' asked Bonaccorsi.

'All right . . . As God wills! . . . Raimondo, do you know what has happened to my son?'

The lawyer made a shape like a funnel with his right hand and tossed it over his shoulder, as if he were throwing away an object of no importance, implying that Antonio's affair was a matter of equally trifling significance.

'No, no! It's very far from being a matter of that sort!'

The lawyer repeated his gesture twice more, each time with greater emphasis. This seemed to comfort the old man and a faint glimmer of hope appeared in his eyes; he called the lawyer over to his bed and embraced him again!

Meantime, in the dining-room, Edoardo was trying to persuade Antonio to go into the bedroom and speak to his friends.

'I assure you that they are exceptional people, all of them. . . . They have a very different sense of proportion from the people you usually mix with. Lawyer Bonaccorsi has read three hundred books of philosophy and who knows how many books of poetry; Professor Rapisardi knows by heart all the pictures in the museums of Rome, Florence and Paris; Engineer Marletti knows Bach and Beethoven as well as the money he has in his pocket. . . .'

'Don't waste your breath, I'm not going!'

All that evening the two cousins sat alone together, in the dark, with a bitter smile on their lips.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

'They throng  
the bars of the gate  
and someone in a low voice  
claims the space  
between the two last bars.'

PALAZZESCHI

'Free themselves from any care, the gods condemn man to  
despair....'

HOMER

'Perhaps some power in heaven enjoys the spectacle of our woes,  
our bitter travail and our unrequited loves, as we do at the theatre.'

LEOPARDI

FOR TWO MONTHS Antonio did not stir from home, consoled every evening by the silent but affectionate presence of his cousin Edoardo. Towards the end of November he allowed himself to be persuaded by Marletti, a friend of Bonaccorsi, to venture out for the first time. The former had been deserted by his wife two years ago and by his mistress a year later; he was, therefore, an expert in avoidism, and knew all the twisty little streets and byways, all the tricks and the best times of the day for avoiding his fellow-men.

Marletti wore a raincoat; Edoardo strode along with a frown on his face and a cane under his arm, peering with his myopic eyes at the lamp-posts which he mistook for men who had stopped to stare at them; Antonio walked between them with his eyes on the ground and his coat collar turned up to cover the lower part of his

face. It was late at night and all the windows seemed tightly closed. But a single ray of light through a crack in a Venetian blind was enough to make Antonio's heart sound like a submerged propeller. He immediately suspected that a woman had her eyes glued to the opening; he imagined hair curling over bare shoulders, the straps of a nightgown slipping down to the elbows, bare feet arched by the effort of standing on the toes; his mind's eye saw mirrors, slippers, petticoats, ribbons, parasols, combs, feathers, ear-rings, buckles and hairpins; all these objects made him feel guilty and stirred up his dormant fears. Antonio quickened his step and his two friends, as if he had pulled a trigger, jerked forward and hastened after him.

Naturally they were careful to avoid going anywhere near the Puglisi house. But, as soon as he reached home at two in the morning, Antonio, leaning against the terrace railings, found himself looking at that dark roof, shining in the moonlight like the scaly back of a giant fish. He felt he could see under it as clearly as he could see its glistening surface and he imagined that he saw Barbara asleep, her mouth against the pillow, her right hand resting on its thumb and her fingers curved. He even smelt the faint odour of moist talcum-powder between her skin and her nightgown. There on the little table beside her bed was the missal in its double binding and covered by her rosary, there wrapped in a blue scarf was the little lamp, shedding a soft mottled light on the empty white expanse of the pillow on which he had so often laid his cheek. Barbara's head was down in the hollow between the two pillows and the dim lamplight made her black hair look like a deep, still pool streaked by rays from the moon.

Antonio knew that everything in that head was regulated as mechanically as the workings of a clock and that her thoughts, like the hands of a clock, revolved with rigid precision, from one figure to the next and that the figures represented nothing but concrete tasks dictated by her duty, mainly to the Church. But his own figure? He broke out into a cold sweat at the thought that his figure or rather image never, never passed through that adorable head, not even when her brain was relaxed in sleep! With the meticulous precision of a man possessed by an obsession, he visualised the exact point in space against which, at this very moment, Barbara's forehead was resting; that smooth, white, hard forehead, which he would never penetrate, not even at night. . . . He felt as if he was going to burst with longing and despair; he paced restlessly up and down the terrace, stopping occasionally to press his hands to his temples and to his eyes. Shaking his head like a tortured beast in a trap, he took a deep breath, groaning as he drew in the air through his clenched teeth.

He went to bed and lay with his eyes open staring at the darkness which pressed down upon him. Towards dawn, when his father called for the maid, no longer with a loud, irritable shout, but in a pitifully weak voice, Antonio closed his eyes and went to sleep.

At this point an exceedingly strange phenomenon must be recorded. Antonio was now thirty-five years old. In his younger and happier days he had been extraordinarily good-looking; but now, in spite of or, perhaps, because of insomnia, humiliation and anguish, he had become even more handsome.

Edoardo could not help staring at him in puzzled astonishment; surely no man had ever exuded a more

powerful aura of stark virility? He had never seen a face express, with unmistakable intensity, such passionate desire for the opposite sex. Edoardo could not understand it, but he thought that being a man made him lack the right kind of perspective. In fact women did not disagree with him. Quite the contrary!

From February 1939 onwards, when he began to go out in the daytime, women threw such languishing glances at Antonio that his steps faltered and he felt completely unnerved.

One morning, on the stairs, he caught sight of the Ardizzone spinster, standing on the landing below him, poised to pounce on him. He tried to avoid her by slinking along the opposite wall, but she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him, showering his cheeks with a hot flood of tears.

Antonio had the greatest difficulty in breaking away from her, and fled down the stairs.

In the street he was so angry and upset that he hardly knew where he was going; he could only interpret such incidents as evidence of his disgraceful condition being common knowledge to all the women of Catania; they must consider that it justified them in letting down all their usual barriers of modesty and reserve and in treating him with the aggressive masculinity which they knew he lacked. He continued his walk, and when, some time afterwards, he met Edoardo, his face still blushed at the thought of his encounter.

Edoardo wanted him to go to Lawyer Bonaccorsi's office, but Antonio indignantly refused.

'Up till now I have done just what you wanted me to do. I went out at night, then I went out in the daytime; I go to church on Sundays, I go into the cafés with you

... but don't ask any more of me! Whenever I set foot inside someone else's house, I feel as if I were being stifled.'

Antonio went on walking by himself, looking at the roofs and terraces of the lovely city.

Each thing he looked at seemed to hover in the Sicilian air, isolated by its own unique and pendulous beauty. A woman was singing and beating a carpet on a balcony above him, which was crowded with mattresses, carpets and potted palms. The dust from her carpet drifted slowly across the balcony and remained in mid-air, as if hypnotised by the sun. . . . Liberty, Beauty, Virtue—to which of these could he have aspired if only he could throw off the weight which was crushing him? What would his chosen activity have been if only he had been able to do that other thing first? At the Piana, when he was still living happily with Barbara, he had read a few books which had enchanted him. At sunset, with his forehead pressed against a balcony window, he had seen his Century, his Time, as a personage dressed in drab grey, without eyes or mouth, and with an enormous face whose outlines blocked out half of the sky. Perhaps he, too, was capable of passing judgment on his Time, aided by the thinkers whose books he had been reading. Perhaps he might have even been able to think of some epithet or nickname for it which would immortalise him for all posterity! Liberty tyranny? Liberalism socialism? Idealism materialism? Immanence transcendence? . . . My God, what a wealth of ideas for men to choose from, who were not shackled as he was!

He returned home with a bad headache; the very idea that he was capable of thinking at all had exhausted him.

The next day he received a perfumed envelope. He shut himself in his room and opened it; it was a letter from a woman which made him blush and sweat:

‘My Antonio,

‘Words cannot express my contempt for that notary’s daughter whom you honoured with your name! If I could get her in a room alone with me, I would tear her to pieces with my nails!

‘Is this what she learnt when she knelt on the mahogany and red velvet prayer stool in her house? Is this what she thought she heard as she listened to the words of Holy Mass? I am also a Daughter of Mary and the Madonna taught me a very different lesson; she taught me to love you, love you like a faithful and devoted wife, love you proudly in front of all the world, with all the strength of my purity!

‘When your marriage has been annulled, remember that at the second corner of the Viale XX Settembre there dwells a heart that for years has ached with love for you, a slave who has dedicated the rest of her life (which ought to be a long time: I am eighteen years old) to you, who only asks to be allowed to lie at your feet like a dog. . . .’

This was the first of a shower, more like a cloudburst, of letters of every shape and description: signed and unsigned, long as biographies and short as despatches, some imperative and intimidating, others one long supplicating moan, with the writing straight or slanting backwards, clear or illegible, as uneven as the scribbling of a medium in a trance or regular and balanced as if traced by the fine paint brush of a Chinese artist. One said: ‘When I put my arms around you in our snug little room, you will swoon with joy.’ Another: ‘One night

on my breast and you will burst into flames!' Another: 'All you have to do is to pass your hand over my skin; just come and try it, I have brought off many a miracle in my time!' But most of them were from young girls: 'It has always been my favourite dream to live a life of spiritual love, of looks, words and complete understanding!' Or:

'One night, at Taormina, in the garden of the Hotel San Domenico, my fiancé lost control of himself. Instead of wanting to take pity on him, I felt nothing but fear and disgust: later they explained to me that this was the way men always behaved towards women, their way of showing that they loved a woman. I was utterly shattered! I broke off the engagement and swore to take the veil. A dark, damp dungeon would have seemed paradise to me if it meant that none of the opposite sex could get at me. But now, with all my soul, I feel that I am justified in not carrying out my vow to take the veil and that I am free to marry you, you, Antonio, my precious love. Last night Saint Catherine appeared to me in a dream and told me that the Heart of Jesus considered me free from my bond. Let us marry each other, Antonio, let us marry each other quickly. . . .'

'Antonio, do you remember the fifteen-year-old child who held Barbara's veil at your wedding? That child is now a woman and bitterly regrets not having poured paraffin on the veil she was holding, to burn up that infamous creature who dared to pronounce before God that lying YES. How I envied her that day! If only you could have laid your hand on mine instead of hers. I would have given anything to be changed even into one of her hairs, so that I could take some tiny part in your marriage! . . . I tore up all the photographs showing

shameful and humble me standing behind that monster; naturally I cut out your likeness first and wear it next to my heart. Antonio, was it not the will of God which placed me so near you when you were taking to yourself a companion for life? Does not that mean that you and I are married, just a little bit married? . . . '

'As you walked along the Viale Regina Margherita late at night did you think that everyone was asleep as you passed by? I was not asleep. My room is a semi-basement and my window, when I leave it open, looks out on shoes, skirts, trousers, dogs, cats, carriage wheels, horses' hoofs, everything that moves along the street and prevents the light from coming in to my room. My bed is against the street wall. Lying on it every night I heard, always at exactly the same time, a noise which was different from all the other noises. My heart recognised it at once and gave a jump; and I, too, jumped up out of bed. Then the noise left all the other noises behind it and entered into the silence of my little Viale. . . . Staggering like a drunken woman, I went to the window, raised a corner of the blind and glued my eyes to the window. Another minute and there your dearest feet were in front of me . . . '

Most men would have been delighted to receive such letters as these, and there were hundreds of them; Antonio was annoyed by them, he recoiled from them, as one does from clumsy, involuntarily offensive and painful caresses. He became more irritable and sensitive every day and suspected that he aroused in women abnormal, unnatural, even perverted desires. Underneath this so-called exclusively spiritual love, all this sanctimonious innocence, he thought that he detected a ferocious masculine aggressiveness. Women treated him more like

men treat women; now they all considered him fair game; they could write to him with impunity, speak to him, gild the pill, hide the truth with some able euphemism, be very careful not to frighten him, and finally persuade him to put himself trustingly in their hands. Surely this was the technique of a consummate Don Juan?

His devoted admirers became legion; one street after another became closed to him because one of them lived there; his daily walks became more and more restricted in geographical scope; back in his room, the first thing that he saw was that hateful white splodge of letters against his black desk. Day after day the same ritual! Would these infernal women never leave him alone?

But worse was to come.

The trial had been referred by the Diocesan Court to the Court of the Sacred Rota. The Magnanos, appalled at the very idea, did not even nominate a representative and put up no defence. So, in June 1939, the marriage was officially annulled.

A kind friend told Antonio that, in the drawing-rooms of Catania, Barbara was now addressed, loudly and insistently, as Miss. One day he was crossing the Viale Regina Margherita from south to north in order to avoid his semi-basement admirer, and saw a crowd of men working on the façade and roof of the Brońte palace. When he realised the significance of the work, he became so dizzy that he had to take a cab to go home. The next day he heard that the marriage of the duke would be celebrated in a fortnight's time.

Thanks to their influence with the party and the Government, the princes and dukes of Bronte could get anything done in the shortest possible time. They set in motion first this and then that person, right up the

bureaucratic scale. Once the process started it seemed unending and not a single clerk was left in peace. From top to bottom every cog in the machine shook as if a giant had stepped on the accelerator; perhaps it was more like a tidal wave sweeping powerfully through the corridors of the Ministries in Rome, its final mild oscillations reaching the most moth-eaten and dilapidated village hall and shaking up the most somnolent and obscure little bureaucrat. Papers, which in other cases crawled from desk to desk like snails, in their case flew from archbishop to tribunal, from tribunal to Ministry, from Ministry to parish.

The Duke of Bronte, called Nené by his friends, was overjoyed at the outcome of the trial and the prospect of an early marriage. His life had been one long round of gaiety and facile successes, uncompensated either by toil or worry. He had now become so fat that his neck had disappeared. As he waddled through the streets, a perambulating bladder of lard, he was greeted on all sides by deep bows and sycophantic smiles. But who bothered to observe the man himself? Behind the monstrous shape everybody saw the princely expanse of his boundless estates, which a racehorse could not have covered in a single night. The more ridiculous he seemed the more impressive and majestic the mountains seemed, which were inside the boundaries of his vast possessions. His property was sacred even to the birds, which were the perquisites of his gamekeepers, and to the dogs who picked up the birds; if he lacked beauty, his lemon groves, shining in the sun, and his cornfields, ablaze with poppies, made up for it.

He was certainly not a genius, perhaps he was not even intelligent, but what was the good of quoting the

old saw 'The more stupid the beast the happier he becomes' to a man who could let his own vast herds answer for him with the lowing and bleating and barking and neighing of thousands of animals, all his own property, eating his grass, being butchered for him, carrying his family and friends or crouching at his feet?

On the other hand, he was the most docile of men; he was devoted to Saint Anthony of Padua; on New Year's Eve he knelt in the midst of an elegant throng, buried his face in his hands for a long time and then raised it, bathed in tears, to the altar. His public and private charities were innumerable: he subsidised fencing rooms, hospitals, orphanages, soccer teams, parish churches, Fascism, almshouses. In summer he entertained officers' wives in one of his villas; he built mountain huts, gave up his gold plate for his country, as well as his wrought-iron gates to be made into cannon; he gave sheets to Red Cross hospitals, gift packages to the municipal guards, flags to submarines and scholarships to students. He was ready to assist anyone, provided that they were in good standing with the Government. It was inconceivable to him that a private citizen, in full possession of all his faculties, should disapprove of anything that was considered right by ministers, prefects, army generals, commanders of the Carabinieri, the King, the cardinals, the bishops and, in fact, all respectable men who were out of debt. Further, he was a modest and polite man, with eyes always wide open, as if he were amazed at everything he saw; this gave people, to whom he was talking, the pleasing impression that they were particularly interesting to him. His invariable answer was: 'Ah, yes?' 'Ah, yes . . . really?' In short, even the most unfortunate man

alive, even a starving man could hardly be so churlish as to envy or hate such an accomplished gentleman.

The marriage of the Duke and Barbara was attended by the flower of the nobility of Catania, Palermo and Messina, by several Roman princes, a Florentine marquis and a Spanish baron visiting Taormina. The palace of the princes of Bronte, on which the workmen had built an extra tower, seemed like a great ship battered by one wave after the other; waves of black and white Fascist uniforms, military uniforms, tunics of every colour, silk dresses, flowers in bouquets, clusters, posies and vases. Balconies and verandahs were packed tight with merry-makers, holding glasses in their hands; the Piazza and the streets leading into it resounded with the sound of motor horns of every description, the clatter of horses' hoofs, shouts and insults from coachmen and chauffeurs. The crowd was thickest near the gates; the glitter of all that pomp and happiness was reflected on their thin, care-worn faces. At sunset the crowd became even more dense, as it had been announced that the duke and his wife would be coming out soon to leave on their honeymoon. Taking advantage of the crowd and the half-light, Antonio Magnano was standing with his shoulders resting against the trunk of an oleander tree. Alternatively jostled and crushed by the crowd, he was watching the scene with eyes that looked like the eyes of a stag at bay.

Shortly afterwards the palace began to blaze with light, many-coloured lights sprang up all over the garden, and the married couple appeared at the top of the steps.

The rest of the city was in darkness, only the garden was aglow, like a stage set of fairyland. Antonio had one

last look at her, as she paused radiant under a tree, which glittered with coloured lanterns, and stumbled away into the night.

Barbara and fat Nené climbed into their car. From one of the palace windows an old aunt, in her second childhood, leaned out clutching a cold foot-warmer. Further up at another window the mad uncle could be seen putting out his tongue, but he was quickly pulled back from the window by a lackey in a striped jacket. The elder brother, Prince Sarino, stood at the door with his ultra-barren wife, whose face, nevertheless, always carried a smile, usually peculiar to pregnant women overcome with nausea. But when the municipal guards in full-dress uniform lined up on both sides of the gate, when the notables started coming down the steps, the new Mayor of Catania, the Prefect, the Quaestor, Federal Secretary Capàno, Vice-Secretary-General Lorenzo Calderara, and lastly the archbishop, who suddenly turned back, gesticulating wildly because he had lost his skull cap on the steps, an old man's shrill voice was heard.

'Bloodsuckers, petty thieves, unbaptised bandits, you've done a fine job of buying up the law and the Church with your dirty money that stinks of cheese! But you couldn't have done it without the help of those other rascals, as bad as you are, gluttonous swine with the eagle on their caps, who will devour this poor country of ours down to the last stone unless the Lord God stops them in time and burns them off the face of the earth, like the sewer rats they are! You're all in this together, hand in glove; you've cooked up a dish exactly to your filthy tastes, savage dogs; you're nothing but lavatory pans! But the thief's wife doesn't always have the last laugh. The day will come when decent men can hold their

heads up again! In the meanwhile I shall go on shouting: Down with the King, down with . . . !'

At this point a hand was clapped over Signor Alfio's mouth.

'Don Alfio,' whispered the man in his ear, 'it's lucky for you that I remember your kindness towards my father, when you paid for his cure at Salsomaggiore; otherwise I would have taken you straight to headquarters, and prison would be the least of your troubles!'

'What do I care. I'd go to prison with pleasure! Down with . . .'

The policeman tightened his grip and cut off his words.

'That's enough! Come along!'

The policeman pushed old Magnano through the crowd, helped him up into a cab and climbed in beside him.

As the cab was driving away, Antonio recognised his father. He ran as fast as he could to catch up with it, but soon lost sight of it between the palm trees, the kiosks and the crowds along the Via Etnea.

Fortunately the policeman contented himself with taking the old man home; he kissed Signor Alfio's hands, much moved by the thought that 'the saintly spirit of his father' was, at that moment, calling down a blessing on him. He advised the old man to keep calm and be more cautious, and ran down the steps without even waiting to drink the glass of wine which had been poured out for him. As he went out of the door he turned.

'You must promise me by your sacred dead,' he said, 'by the love you bear towards your wife and son, that you will never allow that name to escape from your lips!'

But after he had gone old Magnano was still boiling with righteous rage.

'They'll start a war all right, but they'll lose it! As sure as there is a God they'll lose it! You'll see! You'll see the noose hanging over the necks of those two who are holding themselves in for the moment, but who are going to blow up half the world; they're shaking their manes like lions now! But a fine sort of lion for you! Stuffed! Have you seen a stuffed lion? That's what they are and nothing else! And listen to what Alfio Magnano tells you today, the twentieth of July 1939; those two courtyard prowlers are about to turn the world upside down, but do you know what's going to happen?'

The signora looked up at him over her glasses.

'I'll tell you! Here in this very city you'll see an invasion of savages, black men, yellow men, cannibals, with rings in their noses and feathers stuck in their hair!'

'Where, here?' murmured his wife, terror-stricken.

'Yes, here, in Catania, along our widest streets, where you now see cuckolds by the dozen standing as docile as sheep; who've no idea that they have been sold to the butcher, to be massacred one by one!'

'But what are you talking about, Alfio? You must be out of your mind!'

'Oh no, I'm telling you the truth. I wish I could be as sure of going to heaven as I am of the truth of what I am telling you. Here, down this very street, the savages will come marching and sacking the shops and behaving as if they owned the place! . . .'

'Never! Pray God that such things never happen here!'

'They'll march straight down this street! And you'—he shouted to Lawyer Ardizzone who was leaning

over his balcony—‘you with the face like an old shoe, take down that painting of yourself at the club-house, with the Fascist bundle in your hands, because, if they find it they’ll make you pay for it with a kick in the bottom!’

‘We’ll get everything!’ crowed the lawyer, raising his arms draped in his dressing-gown.

‘Who are we? What, everything?’

‘They will give us everything—Corsica, Tunis, Malta, Nice; they will give us everything we want, without war. . . . They will give us everything!’

‘Who will they give everything to? To you, for the sake of your face like a rotten eggplant? And why should they give us everything, why? Perhaps they’re frightened of you and your senate, which has the shameless gall to sing *Giovinezza*, one, two, all together now, like the children in an orphan asylum; and let me tell you that you’ll never get into that senate, never! Not even as a page boy to carry water to the speakers!’

‘I pity you because of your disgrace and overlook your insults because your grief has driven you off your head and you do not know what you are saying.’

‘Oh, go to the devil! You’re nothing but a sanctimonious ape!’

‘But, Alfio,’ said Signora Rosaria timidly, ‘that is the way to make everybody hate us! In case of need nobody will say a good word for us.’

‘I don’t care a rotten fig for anybody’s good word! It would be full of poison, anyhow!’ He continued to stalk up and down the room, pretending to vomit, when he looked through a crack in the curtains and saw Lawyer Ardizzone all puffed up and red as a turkey. ‘And why all this? Why? Because the Lord God Almighty has it

in for Alfio Magnano, for Alfio Magnano who is only a poor devil who has never harmed anybody, much less the Lord God Himself!

‘Alfio, don’t blaspheme!’

‘I am not blaspheming, I am telling the truth. The Lord God is against me, against me, a man who has never killed nor stolen nor sent anybody to prison, nor made trouble in other people’s families, nor taken away anybody’s daily bread; in fact, when I could, and you know it, I took the bread from my own mouth and gave it to others.’

‘That is true, Alfietto, quite true.’

‘And the Lord God sends down on my head the foulest, the blackest, the most poisonous disgrace that can befall a man, a disgrace that my worst enemy could never have thought of, not even if he had racked his brains for a thousand years. And the Lord God must have had it in the back of His head when He created the world. And for whom? And for whom was he saving this murderous, infamous disgrace? For Alfio Magnano!’

‘Alfietto, Alfietto, you’re blaspheming again!’

‘I am not blaspheming, I tell you; I am speaking the truth. Just to think of such a disgrace is enough to make you feel that your brain is being torn out of your head. My own son, my only son, my joy, my pride, my very life, to see him debased, humiliated, trampled under foot like a rag. Even a rag has its uses—you can clean shoes with it; but a man in that condition, what good is he? What can you do with him? What does he go on living for?’

‘Alfio, Alfio, do you want to break a mother’s heart?’

‘But he’s my son, too—the son of Alfio Magnano, of Alfio Magnano who has . . . Bah, I hate to talk about it!’

When Alfio Magnano went to a reception every single husband in the room pulled a long face and started nudging his wife to tell her that it was time to go home. . . .

'Perhaps that's the reason why the Lord . . .'

'Reason, rubbish! It's a great pity that I can't do it any more! Blood of Judas, I wish I could be forty again, even sixty or sixty-five, then I'd still be man enough to spit on the noses of those beardless jackanapes of husbands. I suppose I oughtn't to tell you, but it's a fact, two years ago, at sixty-five, I produced a son all right!'

'A son! Who was it?'

'By a . . . what d'ye call it . . . a typist at the law courts.'

'And where is he now?'

'Dead!'

'Alfio, Alfio!'

'Did you think that Antonio was the only son I ever managed to bring into the world? Let me tell you that there are a hell of a lot of complacent cuckolds walking about the streets who have paid to bring up Alfio Magnano's sons.'

'You shouldn't have done it, Alfio, and you certainly shouldn't boast about it now!'

'I'm not boasting, I'm telling the truth!'

'I'd much rather you were telling lies!'

'Bah! Very well then . . . I'll cross the T's and dot the I's for you, I'll give you the names! Bertolini!'

'What, Bertolini?'

'Judge Bertolini; d'you know him?'

'Of course I do, praise be to God; he may be one of the best men in the world, but I can't help disliking him!'

' . . . his second son, the naval officer. . . .'

'That death's head?'

'Yes, that death's head is my son ! Another son of mine is headmaster of the school at Regalbuto. Another is an imbecile, practically a cretin, but he's the luckiest of the lot, because he owns two thousand acres of land in the middle of Sicily and when that old goat, whom he takes for his father, dies, he'll be a baron as well. . . .'

'But, Alfio, how can you have the heart to tell me such things, to me who . . . ?'

'To you who . . . nothing ! I had all those sons before I married you !'

'But it was a sin, all the same !'

'But I must tell you that I had others afterwards !'

'Alfio, I hope you don't know what you're saying !'

'Don't I ? In Florence a young bride on her honeymoon slipped out of her bedroom and came into mine ! I left my mark on the woman, I can tell you ! . . . And you'll hardly believe it ! . . . In Catania a whore wanted to leave the brothel and work as a maid-of-all-work in our house . . . just like that . . . she didn't want any wages, she only wanted to be able to see me every day !'

'But, Alfio, why are you telling me all this ?'

'I'm telling you so that you won't think that your son has become what he has become through any fault of mine. Unfortunately for him, and for me, too, Antonio doesn't take after me ; I'd rather have starved as long as I could have gone on chasing the women . . .'

Signor Alfio threw himself down on a couch, completely exhausted.

'And the only reason that I'm not able to go on doing it now is that this wretched business has knocked the wind out of me ; if I could only see a little light, even the slightest gleam of light ahead, I would be at it again. . . . By God !'

The next day he hurried along, like a man anxious to reach the confessional to be absolved of a deadly sin, to Lawyer Bonaccorsi's office.

'Did you see what they did to me? Did you see how they ganged up on me? Is there no religion, no justice, no world left? Listen, I've got a proposal to make to you and you've damned well got to agree to it; if you don't I'll never speak to you again! The day this lot gets kicked out I want to be the chief prosecutor in the peoples' court! I'll be pitiless and merciless. If my own brother comes up in front of me, with a likeness of my own mother in his hands, if my own brother has been guilty of wearing the golden cock on his head, I'll have him shot! Dukes, notaries, federal secretaries, archbishops, counts, ministers . . . I'll have them all drawn and quartered!'

'I don't believe it! You're the kindest man in the world; you wouldn't even kill a fly!'

'You're wrong, Raimondo; I'd string those gentlemen up like a line of pigs in a slaughter-house!'

'You're much too kind, Alfio!'

'Raimondo, say that again and I'll lose my temper! I tell you that I'm not kind!'

At this point the ex-brigand Compagnoni broke into the conversation.

'Why the devil shouldn't we believe that Signor Alfio is capable of ruthless action when necessary?' he said testily. 'I'm an old hand at the game. I know that when a meek man catches fire he burns hotter than the devil himself! The only time in my long and evil life that I was really frightened was in a café: I started teasing a seminary student, as thin as a rake and as yellow as a lemon. At the first gibe he answered nothing! At the

second, nothing! At the third and fourth, nothing . . . but at the fifth, what happened to him? Was I up against a cat with hydrophobia, an enraged hyena? Every time he jumped I thought his head was going to go through the roof; he fell on me from all sides at once; he bit my wrist to the bone—look, you can still see the scar! As for me, Signor Alfio, you can count on my helping to elect you prosecutor when the day comes. I won't fail you!

Two days later Signor Alfio was accosted by four villainous-looking individuals while he was walking along the Via Etnea. They started jeering at him and taunting him with being a miserable anti-Fascist, obviously with the object of making him lose his temper and giving them an excuse for attacking him. Fortunately, before he could come to any physical harm, one of his old friends happened to pass by and was able to persuade the infuriated old man to go home with him.

After this incident he stayed at home, without speaking a word for a whole day.

His wife was worried: not a sound, not even spitting or clearing his throat! She kept looking into the room, feeling like a nurse whose patient stops breathing!

But the old man was there all right, sitting at his desk, with his eyes glued to the green baize which covered the desk top.

The next morning he woke up shouting at the top of his voice for his coffee; he wanted it immediately, without a minute's delay!

After he had thrown on his clothes, in a fury of impatience, he shouted: 'Antonio, Antonio!'

Antonio came running, still in his pyjamas.

'Antonio, if you go out today, you must do me a favour!'

‘Tell me, what?’

‘You must carry a revolver!’

‘Why, Papa?’

‘For no special reason, just one of my queer ideas, but you must do it as a favour to me, you must carry a revolver!’

‘But why? Can’t you explain?’

‘Oh, Santa Genoveffa! I don’t have to explain anything, but are you or are you not going to carry a revolver to please me?’

‘All right, Papa, I will.’

‘My God, what a fuss over nothing! The same applies to me. If I go out, I’ll pocket the big pistol that belonged to my father.’

Anonio was both alarmed and puzzled and went out in search of Edoardo, who was able to give his friend a detailed account of what had happened to his father the previous day. This distressed Antonio to such an extent that he allowed himself to be persuaded by Edoardo to go up with him to Lawyer Bonaccorsi’s office. He found all the habitués there and also Ermenegildo Fasanaro, with his head down and his lower lip pendulous, for all the world like a poor old cow standing patiently in the sun.

Antonio, too, sat listening in silence. He found it extremely pleasant and soothing to listen to a group of men talking about abstract subjects and never once referring, even accidentally or casually, to women.

At the end of an hour he rose to his feet.

• ‘I am very sorry, but I must go now,’ he said.

His uncle, Ermenegildo, also said goodbye to his friends and walked out with Antonio.

In the street the bitter and suspicious expression, which

had made him look like a cow pestered by swarms of flies, became even more accentuated and he gave a long, laborious and cavernous sigh.

As they came to the Piazza Dante he seemed to make a great effort to shake off his mood of depression and began to speak:

'How I love my native island! I could kiss every stone of it; I could even kiss the flies and the bird droppings! When I was in Paris and in Barcelona I kept thinking about our dirty little street urchins who grin at you, but all the time they're hiding a stone behind their backs to chuck at you. . . . Why, here is the very palm tree I used to think about! I would have given you all the gardens of Versailles in exchange for that one palm tree. . . . This is it all right, the beauty! . . . In Spain I had constant attacks of dizziness throughout the whole of one year . . . I am not exaggerating. In Barcelona I couldn't take a step without feeling the ground give way under my feet. But what I was afraid of was not of falling down, but of hitting my nose against an alien piece of earth, without character or smell, or at any rate nothing like the smell of my own earth . . . this earth that I am stamping my foot on now! This earth that I shall kiss so long and so deeply one day that I shall leave my old bones in it!'

'Uncle!'

'I know, I'm making a fool of myself. A broken pot lasts longer than a sound one . . . But . . .'

'But what?'

'But . . . I was going to say . . . forget about it, I must be in my dotage!'

They turned out of the Piazza into the Via Di San Giuliano which descends steeply towards the centre of

the city. From this point, through massive grey palaces with their ornamental gardens and across the shimmering roofs of the city, they could see a stretch of sea lightly covered by the faint breeze of the sirocco. Suddenly Ermenegildo began to speak again.

‘And yet I have never believed that the human mind creates the world about it! . . . That is, let me explain myself more clearly. When I read our great living philosopher, I bow my head and admit that I am beaten. There’s nothing to be said except that he’s right. Reality does not, cannot exist beyond human thinking; we cannot visualise any phenomenon outside our thinking, which is another way of saying, except by virtue of our mental conception of it. . . . By God, I can’t think of a single argument against his thesis! I’ve often bitten my hands and my elbows to stimulate my brain, but even then I can’t find a single one! . . . And yet, I feel something deep down inside me, a protest, an aspiration . . . how shall I put it . . . a sort of divine lunacy, something which gives the lie to this way of reasoning which suffocates all that is best in me, to . . . what shall I say? . . . the arrogance of our great living philosopher. Some day another philosopher, greater and more courageous than he, will arise and prove, in language as beautiful as the sun, that on the one side there is the world and on the other thought which believes (note that word carefully) that it has created it, but really reflects it; on the one side the body and on the other the mind. . . . Our great living philosopher maintains that no such proof can ever be found. . . . But—and here I allow myself to criticise him—how can he mortgage the future; by virtue of what inner infallibility can he establish, once and for all, what men can never think or never be able to prove? Could

one say that he has become a determinist, his own brand of determinism, of course . . . perhaps without knowing it? . . . What? He has derided all the prophets and now he comes out flatly with a fine new prophecy of his own? . . . Eh, what do you say to that?’

‘I would advise you to look where you are going; there are some steps there.’

‘That a truth and a fact are the same thing . . . he’s always convinced me, but I have never believed it. I mean that it’s one thing to be convinced by an argument and quite another thing to believe that it is true. . . . But I can’t expect you to understand! When your liver becomes as hard as a stone, like mine; when, every time you try to pee, you produce more tears than you do drops of urine because it hurts you so badly, then perhaps you’ll understand . . . and, furthermore, sorry to bore you, but you’ll have to put up with my senile babbling. I may be a stupid old man, but just what does it mean to say that life is all right as it is, that it’s wrong to complain and ask for something better? . . . I find it anything but all right! There was a time when our great men declared in a loud voice that they wanted to know the absolute truth; they wanted to know why we are born and who benefits by the sufferings of humanity which the universe dispenses with such lavishness. They asked why we were granted the foreknowledge of the inevitability of our own deaths and yet, while we are still alive, are condemned to be harrowed by the sight of so many of our fellows dying a painful and lingering death. They wanted to know why exceptional men, our poets and our geniuses, have been granted a sort of divining quality which permits them, often in a single bound of intuition, to get so near the truth and yet no man has been or ever

248

will be allowed to encompass it wholly; and finally they asked why if man has been granted the faculty of always wanting to know "Why" he has been denied the satisfaction of ever being given a definite answer. . . . Now all that has been changed! I take my hat off to the idealistic philosophers (unfortunately the others, who, to a certain extent, agree with me don't count for as much as the droppings of a sparrow). I doff my hat and sweep it right down to the ground to our great living philosopher, but, dear Antonio, don't you think that this so-called conciliatory philosophy, which declares: "Are you seeking the truth? Well, your very search for it is the truth! You ask why? Well, the important thing is not the answer, but your question!"—doesn't it seem to you that this philosophy leads you straight up the garden path to resignation and cowardice? Are we in the act of encompassing a vaster space with our minds or are we really about to bow our heads before the mystery which proves to be impenetrable? We claim to have attained serene heights of understanding, and from that altitude gracefully accept the manifold contrasts and absurdities of life; isn't this attitude towards the cosmos far more contemptible than the attitude of despair which the great men of the past adopted towards their inability to understand and, still less, accept them? They preferred suicide to a life of misery and ignorance, which seemed to their great and generous souls entirely dishonourable!

Gesticulating, shouting and leaning on Antonio's arm at each wave of dizziness, Ermenegildo had arrived at the centre of the city which was called the Four Corners.

Here they were jostled and pushed by the crowd. Finally they were crushed against the plate-glass window of a shop and Ermenegildo saw the face of a corpse

staring out at him. Hoping it was not his own, he tried to prove it by winking one eye, but the face winked back at him; he put out his tongue, and the face, inexorably, did the same.

'Let's get away from all these people! Come away, at once!'

They hurried along till they reached the gates of the Collegiata, where they were sheltered from the crowd.

'You love your own sins too much! That's what that twittering wren of a Father Raffaele had the audacity to say to me. I love my sins too much? Which of them, please? The sin of having to make a lot of money? Of out-shining other people in conversation? Of envying my neighbour, if, by any chance, he should happen to be a better man than I am? Of packing my trunks and being able to travel? Of seducing the maids? Of lusting after the wife of a friend? . . . I am sick and tired of all that! I assure you, Antonio, if I loved chastity, poverty and solitude only because they are Christian virtues and not because they procure me relief and pleasure I should be whisked up to heaven so fast that I shouldn't have time to take my boots off. But even in this respect, unfortunately, I am still as much an incorrigible sensualist as I ever was; that's what all we Magnanos have been, at least the male ones; the women have all been Madonnas! I take the same pleasure in chastity as I do in a nice clean white sheet; even death pleases me like a strong injection of morphia does. . . . It PLEASES ME—those are the two words that will keep me standing outside the gates of Saint Peter. . . . It pleases me, everything pleases me! I want to reach out to so many things and enjoy them! . . . Oh, accursed carcass! Miserable cage! This chest of mine gives me hell! My cage is dark inside and

stuffed with the same organs which you see on a plate in the kitchen when they draw a chicken or a goat; the same disgusting lungs, liver, heart, guts; I hate you all; you've made me writhe in agony too often! You're even beginning to dull my brain, to the devil with you!

'Not so loud!' pleaded Antonio. 'People will think that we are quarrelling!'

'All right. . . . Tell me, Antonio, have you never seen that woman again, the one with the heart of stone?'

Antonio shook his head.

'Hasn't she written to you or asked to see you? No! It's incredible, after a love match, an elaborate marriage ceremony with veils, page boys and a High Mass. After three years together she goes off with a toss of her head and marries another man without so much as a backward glance? I should think that you would agree with me that the world is an extremely ugly place! . . . What shall we do now? Shall we have a look in there?'

'Where?'

Ermenegildo pointed towards the door of the church.

'But that was where I was married!'

'Why worry about that? . . . Come on, let's go in!'

Antonio very reluctantly climbed the steps and went in with his uncle. Although the church was deserted, he had never felt so self-conscious; he felt as if everybody in Catania was staring at him.

'Let us kneel,' said Ermenegildo; 'we'll be more comfortable.'.

Antonio did his best to try and avoid remembering the church as it had been on the fifth of July 1935, the day of his marriage, all draped in purple and carpeted in red.

His painful reverie was interrupted by his uncle, who was still in a talkative mood.

'Is it possible that the words heaven, paradise, divine justice, eternal peace have no real meaning? Do they correspond to nothing at all, those lovely words which we have been taught to make the focus of our dreams? Is it possible that the name Jesus Christ—I repeat: Je-sus Chr-ist—is simply a name attached to a poor dead body and that to say it aloud means nothing, that no one, neither in this world nor in the other world, will even turn around to listen? I repeat it again: Je-sus Chr-ist—the name of a madman who lived two thousand years ago, who deluded himself in all good faith that he was shedding his blood and dying in order to redeem human weakness and that the only reason that the soldiers who beat him remained alive and that the towers of the city of his agony remained upright was because he condescended to restrain his omnipotence? Jesus Christ, a pitiful visionary with his eyes forever turned up to heaven, but which he actually knew absolutely nothing about; he was as ignorant of its shape and composition, as he was of the nature of the light which poured down from it, but he considered it already as his kingdom and saw himself sitting to the right of a singularly peculiar Father. . . . But then, that Thursday evening, when he prayed in the garden, repeating the word Father in such melting tones, why was there no one up there to listen to him? And when, on the cross, he promised the repentant thief to take him up to heaven, how the poor wretch must have blasphemed when he perceived the dusk of agony turning into a black and hopeless night! . . . Then for us men, whether we're called Ermenegildo Fasanaro or Jesus Christ of Nazareth, is there nothing but darkness or ignorance and, if we're unlucky enough to be sent to school, a philosophy of resignation which is so

smug that it calls the questions we ask in desperation and which are doomed to remain unanswered for all eternity, by the name of truth? Well, I say no! . . . I repeat for the third time: Je-sus Chr-ist! . . . by God, no! It's not the same as saying Ermenegildo Fasanaro. It's very different! . . . Je-sus Chr-ist! . . . But who really knows? In twenty thousand years from now, He may be talked of as a superseded and semi-barbarous moralist! . . . and nevertheless how wonderful it would have been if one of us, this citizen of Nazareth, had been the son of God and would be waiting for us on the other side, with his body like ours, knowing by experience what it means to have had lungs, liver, intestines and a heart with valves! . . . would be waiting near our dead body, to encourage us with his smile, when we arrived tired and frightened after that interminable journey. . . . How wonderful if all the Latin patter, with its high-sounding names and phrases, which our clergy pontificate at us, were the literal truth! All treasures of pure gold—the Communion of Saints, the remission of sins, the life eternal . . . how unutterably comforting if we could believe in angels with wings, the Madonna with that frozen face, Jesus Christ with that heart hanging out of his chest! . . . How wonderful if our Pope Pius XII—I know his nephew, by the way—was really the Vicar of God and if a visit from our parish priest in the country was not only a pleasant habit, but really useful, much more useful than the visit of some stupid doctor who looks at you as if you were an animal, and his property at that, but actually knows as much about you as a Sicilian does about China from having seen a single film about it at the cinema. . . . What a pity that all those nice things are only flimsy illusions! . . .'

Antonio interrupted him : 'Uncle, there's a priest.'

'Where?' said his uncle, also getting up from his knees.  
'I'll go and confess myself to him at once.'

But Antonio had now recognised Father Raffaele. He turned his uncle round and tried to push him towards the door. But he need not have bothered. Father Raffaele had recognised Antonio and was also trying to slip away; the good man was conscience-stricken; he blamed himself bitterly for not having succeeded in persuading Barbara to change her attitude towards the annulment.

Antonio was in a state of appalling agitation. That figure in a black cassock, receding into the shadows of the lofty nave, seemed to him charged with all the mystery of Barbara.

'Uncle, I don't feel well; I can't focus my eyes properly; will you take me home?'

Ermenegildo hurried to his side and half carried him out of the church, but in spite of his nephew's weight he kept murmuring:

'... either I'll become a Communist myself! ... or a catholic, a catholic full of faith and devotion, home and church! : ... or I'll open the gas tap and forget to turn it off!'

## CHAPTER TWELVE

'Each sad and blighted dream mocks  
us, as toward the barren rocks  
we drift, in the autumn of our lives.'

A. BLANDINI-NEAN

FOUR YEARS LATER, one August day in 1943, the good brigand Compagnoni was riding on a donkey which staggered under his weight and looked like a dog under the influence of alcohol. When he reached a small square in Punta, the first suburb along the road which climbs up the slopes of Mount Etna from Catania, he shouted up towards the balconies of a house which had seen better days:

'Signora Rosaria, Signora Rosaria, who told your husband about what was going to happen? He spoke the truth! Did you see all the military lorries going by, thousands upon thousands of them? Well, they've stopped coming at last. Who do you suppose are coming now? They were just behind me! The savages on horseback . . . yes . . . with rings in their noses and feathers in their heads! . . . Just exactly as your husband said. Just exactly, as if he'd seen their pictures in the paper! . . . The savages, the cannibals! . . .' He waved his enormous arms in a frenzy of anger, satisfaction, horror and disgust. 'I would never have believed that my old eyes would see savages riding along the streets of Catania! And now they're coming here! It must have been the devil! Yes, it was the devil who told Signor Alfio!'

But much had happened during those four years, even in Catania; perhaps Edoardo Lentini felt the impact of the mighty conflict more powerfully than Antonio's other friends.

The whole of Europe was 'blacked out'; by night ships slid over the black and mournful waves like hearses; whole populations lived on nothing but raisins; and yet Edoardo felt that there was a 'smell of happiness' in the air.

'Soon,' he said, 'we shall believe that these twenty years of tyranny, vulgarity and presumption were nothing but a dream in a single night of fever. Our only relic of the past will be the nervous tic of turning round before talking out loud which will amuse our grandchildren. "What's the matter with Grandfather?" they will ask. "He keeps looking over his shoulder all the time!" And our sons will smile and explain that poor old Grandfather lived in an age when every citizen had his guardian angel behind him and was put in prison simply for saying that the head of the Government was old . . . Just think of it, Antonio! Soon we'll be able to say exactly what we think! Instead of being a coward and saying, as I did, that Hitler doesn't come up to Mussolini's knees, I shall be able to speak the truth and call them both filthy swine! Sometimes I say to myself, is it still possible! That a time will come when everybody will be able to proclaim their opinions in a loud voice, whatever they may be! . . . But, Antonio, it seems too good to be true! I feel that I am no longer worthy of living in a free society. I shall probably die the night before the happy day!'

The two cousins walked on together in silence.

'The one thing I regret,' continued Edoardo, 'is that the days of civilised conduct, decency, true piety, humanity

and poetry are coming back when we are too old to appreciate them. If only we could go back and be twenty years old again! Our youth disappeared inside that man's pocket. When they arrest and search him they'll find our twenty years on him. The thought of it makes me shudder! To see Europe peaceful and free, a new Europe which honours dreams and music and to think that we're past the age of tumultuous dreams, of spending the whole day singing Tosti's latest song! . . . But the Lord's will be done! The only thing that really matters is that happy times and, above all, freedom should be returned to us!

Such were the sentiments which animated Edoardo during '40, '41 and '42, years passed in alternate phases of trepidation and boundless hope, but shot throughout with an inner glow of happiness. Hope is not a greedy emotion; it feeds on almost nothing, clothes itself in all the colours of the rainbow and keeps singing, in the heart, like a nightingale! It even condescends to sing the latest popular song. Just then it was:

Oh, Pippo, Pippo,  
you don't know  
that the women laugh till they cry,  
as you pass by.  
You think yourself as handsome as Apollo. . . .

Edoardo thought it a delightful song. To him it meant that happy times were coming.

A year or two later:

Every night by the barrack gate,  
under the lamplight, for you I'd wait.  
Tonight you will find me waiting yet,  
for all the world I will forget,

for you, Lily Marlene,  
for you, Lily Marlene.

Oh bugler, tonight you must not call,  
let me hold my love in my arms once more.

Edoardo, chin on pillow, listened to the voice fading away into the night. Europe was tired; the sound of warlike trumpets was anathema to her; she preferred the sound of a good honest smacking kiss under a lamp-post. Romance was returning and here was the first of the new romantics strolling down the street in the middle of the night, and right under Edoardo's balcony, here was the first European with his head full of dreams.

When through the mud I try to run  
I feel myself stagger under my gun.

Adorable European, quite incapable of bearing the weight of a gun.

Whatever will become of me?  
and then I smile and think of thee.

Such a nice, sentimental European; all he needed to blind himself to the mud and the misery was the mental image of a woman, almost any woman!

Edoardo tossed about on his bed and snorted with happiness.

'What's the matter?' asked his wife.

'Soon,' answered Edoardo, 'soon . . .'

'Soon, what? . . .'

'Oh, nothing; you'll see.'

In the meanwhile Antonio was still incubating his obsession with Barbara, which he could not shake off.

Edoardo, as usual, did his best to cheer him up. As they were sitting on the terrace together Edoardo said: 'But that Barbara of yours is a real young delinquent!'

Antonio gave an ironical smile.

'I wonder if what they're saying is true!'

'What do they say?'

'They say . . . they say lots of things. And I'm inclined to believe them! . . . I suppose you don't?'

'But I still don't know what they're saying.'

'They say that Barbara and her husband aren't hitting it off together. I must admit that it's inconceivable to me how any woman could hit it off with that sort of cow, who's got everything that a cow has except a bell round his neck!'

Antonio's face lit up with pleasure.

'And that isn't all. Apparently Barbara's being unfaithful to him! . . . Naturally, you won't believe that. But I damned well do and I would bet anything that it is true!'

'And who's the lucky man supposed to be?'

'The coachman.'

'No!'

'But it's yes, not no! Barbara's got a strong taint of mad blood in her veins. I'm surprised that you lived with her for three years and didn't notice it! I only had to give one look at her. . . . As you know, there are two or three lunatics in the family whom no Puglisi notary likes to hear mentioned. I'll tell you what to do. Go and see your father-in-law—well, the man who was your father-in-law—and ask him how his Uncle Tanino died? You'll see him change colour all right.'

'Why, how did he die?'

'With one woman sitting on his knees and another

at his feet. By his bedside, where the Puglisis usually put their missals, there was a little envelope full of a certain white powder. . . . Another Puglisi, the uncle of Gaetano, whom we've been talking about, sold the same sort of powder, contraband, of course, after the last war; he hid it inside folded bits of paper, in his hair; some of my friends used to go to his house at night; if they handed over a nice fat wad of banknotes they had the right to stroke his hair! One night, instead of him they found his wife howling with grief; the unfortunate man was dead. My friends comforted her with the usual consoling speeches, and then, asked: "Didn't he leave a little magnesia powder behind him?" "How do I know?" sobbed the widow. "How do I know if he left any? How do I know where he kept it, because, on top of all our other troubles, we haven't a penny to pay for a Mass for him? . . ." My friends gently pushed the lady aside and went in, hat in hand. The corpse was lying on a bier, with four lighted candles, and, as there was no cushion to support it, the head was hanging down over the edge. One of my friends went up to it, kneeled down, made the sign of the cross, muttered a prayer, crossed himself again, then passed his hand through the corpse's hair and took out a small envelope. He went back to the widow, took up her right hand and pressed it against his chest, slipping two thousand liras into her hand, which went to the priest the next day so that he could celebrate a High Mass.'

'So what?'

'Well, all that means that if Barbara wants to search for a few drops of mad blood, she'll find any amount of it. Besides, I know that when she was a child . . . But no matter about that. . . . Let's talk of now! To-

260

day, this very day, if she's . . . by the coachman . . . she's having . . .'

Antonio got up and made a gesture of indignation.

'You,' shouted his cousin, 'are turning into a soft fool!'

Antonio shrugged his shoulders, managing to express a maximum of ironical disbelief by the set of his shoulders and the back of his neck, and walked off.

One day, the two cousins saw a carriage, with the Bronte ducal arms on the doors, rolling slowly along the Via Etnea.

Antonio stopped and nudged Edoardo.

Perched on his box, wearing a vizored cap, a whip in his right hand and the reins in his left, sat the coachman.

'Look,' said Antonio, 'look at your coachman! How old do you think he is?'

The coachman was an old man, but Edoardo was generous enough to say that he was very old, not less than seventy-five.

'Anyhow,' he added, 'the fellow who told me that story about Barbara is a liar of the first water. Yesterday he told me, quite seriously, that he had heard over the radio, with his own ears, that Hitler had gone blind. To tell you the truth, he wasn't the only one to tell me that tale. But, anyhow, as far as I am concerned Barbara can do what she likes. Nowadays too much is happening in the great world for us to bother our heads about Barbara and the Duke of Bronte! Soon, my dear Antonio, very soon . . .'

It turned out to be not so very soon, but finally the day that Edoardo had so longed for was there—the fifth of August 1943! It was there at last! But how black with dust and with the dull roar of destruction! Tyranny had

fallen, but the roofs of the houses, the church towers, the mellow old bridges over the river had fallen with it; the clock-faces on the public buildings were cracked and the hands had stopped against the minute in which the bomb slaughtered a group of poor folk huddled in abject terror. . . . The good brigand Compagnoni, riding on a donkey, had arrived at the Punta, and was shouting up at the grimy little house in which Signora Rosaria and her son Antonio had taken refuge, shouts that the Africans and the Indians were coming up behind him.

Antonio was lying on his back on a couch, with the usual silk scarf around his neck, and turned to face the wall.

‘They can go back where they came from,’ he said.

‘Poor girls, poor women!’ said his mother. ‘May the blessed Madonna save them! They say that these savages will be merciless with them!’

Antonio sat up abruptly.

‘Stuff and nonsense! The negroes don’t behave any differently from the whites.’

‘I’m not so sure about that!’ said Signora Rosaria. ‘There’s such a lot of talk going about! How do I know what to believe? I wonder what has happened to that poor house of ours! Has it been bombed to the ground? Have the soldiers taken it? At least they ought to leave me the old bed where your father and I slept for so many years. I don’t mind if they carry off everything else!’

‘What can you do about it, Mamma? They’ve got guns and they’ll shoot you.’

‘I’ll tear their eyes out with these nails of mine!’

‘They won’t let you get near them, Mamma.’

‘Oh yes, they will! How would they know that I

wanted to scratch their eyes out? They wouldn't know and I would walk up to them quite quietly and then suddenly I'd scratch. . . . But I'm being an old fool! Antonio, be a good boy, and go down to Catania one of these days, and have a look at our old house.'

'I'll go tomorrow.'

The next day Antonio stayed put on his couch.

For the next two weeks he lay listening, in a wistful and nostalgic daze, to the sound of the bagpipes played by the Scots soldiers billeted in the house next door to the chemist's. The mournful wailing made him think of Barbara. What was happening to her? Were the rumours true? The Punta notary claimed that she had been raped by a German soldier; his assistant that she had run away with an Englishman. But the local doctor, who was a friend of the Puglisi and Bronte families and who was a much more reliable witness, as he drove regularly to the village to which Barbara and her husband had fled, reported that the Bronte palazzo was closed up; that neither the Germans nor the English had broken into it. In fact it was Barbara who had driven off the English soldiers, who were hammering away at the great front doors with their rifle butts, simply by showing herself on one of the balconies.

Towards the end of August he shook off his lethargy, stretched, put on his black suit and went down to Catania.

A sorry sight! Along the Corso most of the lovely buildings were nothing but rubble piled up against the few walls which were still standing; most of the shops were shut, with their iron shutters distorted by the thieves who tried to break in as soon as it was dark. Pyramids of rubbish in every corner; long serpents of smouldering flame crawling over everything and sending up a dense cloud

of evil-smelling smoke which reached up as far as the terraces of the few remaining houses.

Flocks of swallows, frightened by the shooting, had flown up to a great height and were floating, suspended like a shadow, between the blue of the sky and the murky grey of a rolling flood which seemed to have submerged the city. Mosquitoes, on the other hand, had been sucked in from the Piana into the heart of the city; another dense cloud which hovered and buzzed over everything and everybody, injecting malaria even into the arms, outstretched to a protesting heaven, of a few broken-down hack sopranos—dragged out of retirement to sing to the soldiers at the Bellini theatre.

Naked urchins, with their shoulder-blades sticking out like wings, were searching the rubbish heaps for a morsel of food. The skeleton of a piano hung over the edge of a hillock of rubble; at night its strings, scraped by the edge of some old cupboard, which the vandals were trying to sneak away with, would give the alarm in a voice like the lament of a lost soul. There were no matches. If you wanted to light a fire you had to tramp to the other end of the city to borrow one from a far-sighted friend.

Along the Corso there were placards of all sizes with English wording: 'This war will end but venereal diseases go on!' 'Always be on your guard against venereal disease.' 'What are you taking home to your girl? Are you going to take her a dose of venereal disease as a present?' In the middle of the Corso the lower part of the façade of a once dignified and elegant café had been covered with white plaster and screens; over the door a luminous sign ordered the soldiers to 'Come in! Wash first or at least afterwards!' The public park was packed tight with military lorries; at dusk, the bombed-out citi-

zens roamed the streets like ghosts haunting the spot where their houses had been buried. Others, whose flats and houses had been turned into military billets, had been reduced to living with poor and resentful relatives. They spent their time looking through the windows of their old homes. Where a picture of the Sacred Family had hung on the wall they would see a drawing of a naked woman with only one eye. The other had been shot out by a drunken soldier.

The dockside district, with its crowded jumble of buildings, old palaces embedded, like tarnished jewels, in rows of slum houses, was surrounded by barbed wire and all civilians were forbidden access. There the negro soldiers, with their high, whining voices, were billeted; the evicted inhabitants would peer through the barbed wire and catch sight of a negro strutting out on to the balcony with a woman's hat on his head and a fur wrapped around his neck.

There was perhaps more spiritual than material damage. Old grievances flared up between families. Old friends suspected each other and cut each other in public. The houses that were still standing looked mournful and neglected, as if they had slammed their doors against each other out of spite. The swaggering bullies of yesterday were reduced to bowing humbly to their victims, in public, and venting their inverted malice on the hides of their children. The outcasts of yesterday met with a mixed fate. Some were further cast down, some lifted up.

The good Lawyer Bonaceorsi had barricaded himself inside his house; he even refused to see his old friends, whose conduct he now disapproved of. Dressed in black, handkerchief in hand, he sat in front of a mirror, as if

to console himself with the sight of a martyred face, and all day long the slow tears furrowed their way down his cheeks. So tender-hearted was this gentle creature, who had spent his life in meditation and attempted good works, that he could not bring himself to venture out of doors.

Engineer Marletti, on the other hand, was now the mayor; he strode along the Via Etnea, covered with dust and deafened by the tanks and lorries, pretending not to recognise many of his old friends, smiling at and saluting only those who were the new top-dogs. But his authority was only too precarious. One evening some drunken English officers swooped down on him at his own front door, as he was solemnly reading out a list of citizens who were to be deprived forever of all civil rights, hoisted him into their jeep, carried him to the banqueting hall of one of the old palaces, and made him wash up a mountain of dirty dishes.

Lawyer Ardizzone's pristine state of perpetual arrogance had been replaced by an equally permanent state of abject fear. One afternoon, with a painter friend, he crept into the deserted Lawyers' Club and had the Fascist bundle painted out of his portrait. His pompous likeness now seemed to be suspended in a vacuum. But, either because the paint used had been of poor quality or because some enemy had painted it in again, two days later the bundle was back accentuated by a blood-red border!

Antonio reached Catania in the morning. To avoid meeting anybody, instead of going along the Via Etnea, he took a little side street which led from the Via Umberto to his own street. Around the corner from his house the first thing he saw was one of his own doors wrenched from its hinges being used as a bridge to cross a crater

and allow access to the dark little entrance to one of the squalid low houses which stood opposite. A few steps further on he saw a shutter lying on the ground; he knew it only too well as he had scratched his own name on it, with the point of a large nail, at the age of ten. And here was a second shutter, the oldest in the house, broken and covered in mud. Antonio grew pale with dismay at the thought that their old house must have been destroyed.

But the house was still standing. The only damage was to the iron gate, which had been blown off its hinges, was jammed against the gate-post and could no longer be shut. In the hall there were fragments of splintered wood, rubbish of all sorts, fragments of shattered glass from windows and mirrors, heaps of rags and dust. At the foot of the stairs sat the old porter, frightened out of his wits.

‘How are you, Don Sebastiano?’

The old man staggered to his feet, seized Antonio’s hand, carried it up to his own forehead and burst into tears.

‘They sprawl all over the house and if I dare to say a word they bark in my face like mad dogs.’

‘Is there much damage?’

‘No, Signor Ninuzzo, we’ve escaped the bombs, but thieves nowadays seem to have wings!’

‘But why didn’t you sleep upstairs?’

‘I couldn’t face the climb! I’m too old and feeble!’

‘Give me the keys!’

‘My niece is up there trying to clear up some of the mess.’

Antonio ran up the stairs, bumping against strangers, coming from who knows where, some perhaps from his own rooms.

Out of the door of their flat came a cloud of dust, as thick as smoke from smouldering wet wood.

Antonio called out and the porter's niece appeared on the landing. She was about fifty years old, tiny as a hunchback, but straight, strong and lively, with one cheek red and the other purple, the same colour as strong red wine, to which she was inordinately addicted.

'Oh, it's you, Signor Don Ninuzzo. I'll run and get your room ready. It's all at sixes and sevens. If you knew the job we've had to try and keep out all those barefaced robbers! They come along all the time, saying that they're the police, or Americans or English or the devil knows what!'

Antonio shut the entrance door, the only one in the whole house which was still intact, and followed the woman. But he stopped in the first room he came to, the drawing-room, to look at the doors yawning crookedly, the dusty family portraits hanging at a drunken angle, the curtains half-wrenched from the window and, through the shattered window panes, the roof-beams of the next-door house, which had been hit by a bomb, sticking up slantwise. Bad smells, dust and sheets of smouldering paper kept flying in at the window like disconsolate birds. . . . All of a sudden a breathless voice came from the end of the hall: 'Antonio, Antonio, where are you?'

Footsteps came nearer and louder and faster, and a man came in from the hall, a man whom Antonio remembered as being exceptionally young looking for his age; now he looked as if all the years of his life had banded together against him, lain in wait for him at the corner of a dark street and set upon him with staves; each blow had left the ineffaceable mark of old age.

'Edoardo!' cried Antonio, opening his arms to his old friend.

As they clasped hands Antonio felt how cold, dry and cracked Edoardo's was.

'Edoardo?'

'Yes, yes, it's me all right! . . . Do you know where I've come from?'

'No . . . or rather, yes. . . .'

'From prison.'

'They told me that you'd been sent to a concentration camp!'

'First I was in prison, then in a concentration camp and then back to prison again. . . . For all that I don't take back a single word; my views are the same as they ever were! But, heavens above, it's a bit hard on a man to wait for freedom for so many years—and you know just how ardently I longed for it!—and when freedom comes, the first thing they do is to fling me into a cell with an iron door, then they put me behind barbed wire and then back into an iron box. It's funny, very funny!'

The porter's niece put her head in and asked Antonio if she should make up his bed.

'Yes, I want to lie down for a quarter of an hour.'

'And every time that I looked at the inside of my cell, at the barbed wire and the guards outside with their machine guns, the more I grew to hate any kind of tyranny. My guard wasn't at all bad, he was a quiet bank clerk who could speak a few words of Italian. One night, I inside and he outside of the fence, we talked about Shakespeare and Keats, watched the stars hanging so high above our heads and asked ourselves whether this world of ours could ever become clean and beautiful again. Our standing together that way, swapping ideas

on literature and sharing the same stars, seemed a favourable omen; but every time a car passed and its lights were reflected back from the machine gun, my heart missed a beat. The cartridges in it would be fired at me and nobody else if I was rash enough to try and escape. . . . And then, the . . . how can I put it to you, Antonio? The brain is one thing—it can always control one's thoughts—but the heart is another!

'We delude ourselves' that our feelings and emotions come from our hearts; if that is so, our hearts are singularly powerless to prevent our emotions from swamping us. I kept my reason all right, but I could not help having increasingly frequent moods of the blackest despair . . . no man should ever be shut by another man inside an enclosure of barbed wire or behind an iron door! It's a miracle if he comes out of them with his pride as a human being intact.

'In any case, he's left with an animal's instinctive distrust of man, with an ungovernable impulse to run away whenever he hears footsteps approaching. Every evening, when it comes round to the time, the exact time I was arrested, I run and hide in our attic. . . . Every military car or lorry that stops near me stops my heart beating. I can't help feeling that the whole English Eighth Army is looking for me and that it disembarked in Europe solely for the purpose of capturing me. No, Antonio, a man should never have to be captured, never! I've always hated tyranny, but how much more I should have hated it if I had known more about this sort of thing! . . . And it's funny that this sort of thing should have been my introduction to Freedom. . . .'

The porter's niece put her head in again to ask him if he would come out and talk to her, as she wanted to talk

to him, privately, about something. Antonio asked her to wait.

'And then, is it really true that tyranny can be destroyed by shots from these cannon? "You hate the rich and love liberty of thought!" one of my fellow prisoners said to me. "You're an unlucky man! Hatred of the rich will make you join the Communists and they'll throw you in prison because you love liberty of thought!"

'But what can one do? Do those other soldiers that are sweeping down from the East feel the same repugnance as I do for censorship, deportations and imprisonment without trial? Or have they learnt to take these horrors as a matter of course? Antonio, it's our duty to think these things out and take a stand which will allow . . .'

'Excuse me for a moment; I'll be right back.'

Antonio walked out of the room, through the hall, into his bedroom. The woman had finished making the bed.

'What do you want? . . . What is your name?' he asked.

'Rosa. I only wanted to ask you . . .'

'Come on, speak up! What did you want to ask me?'

' . . . Nothing. I only wanted to ask you if you needed anything else?'

Antonio felt a buzzing in his ears; he felt his eyes grow hot and everything around him grew misty; at the same time a wave of desire exploded inside him, swept through his body like a tidal wave and rose up to reach a distant part of his anatomy, a part which had been abandoned for such a long time.

Staggering a bit, he went up to the woman, lifted her by her armpits and crushed her against him.

'What are you doing? But what are you doing? . . . I'm fifty years old.'

'What do I care! Don't make a sound!'

Still holding her tight, he dragged her towards the bed.

'But what are you going to do to me? At least tell me what you're going to do!'

'Be quiet, I say! Hold your tongue!'

She was now lying on her back on the bed, which creaked loudly. António, desperately afraid that the heat which filled him would suddenly leave him, threw himself at the woman, with the concentrated fury of a dog digging for a bone, till a marvellous feeling of delight seemed to lift him right up. . . . His throat and all his viscera seemed to contract and he gave a great shout of triumph. . . .

He felt a hand holding him down on his seat and heard Edoardo's voice.

'What's happening to you? You screamed like a pig being slaughtered, and were trying to tear the flesh off your chest! What's the matter?'

'Oh, so it was only a dream!'

'You must have been dreaming! I was talking to you and instead of listening you went to sleep!'

'What a marvellous dream I had! Edoardo, I dreamed that . . . Do you understand?'

'No, I don't understand . . . What did you dream about?'

'I dreamt I was whole again, functioning properly. . . . I was so happy! Unbelievably happy! But perhaps it wasn't a dream or only the woman was a dream, but I . . . as for me . . . I wasn't dreaming.'

'A fine moment to choose for dreaming like an idiotic schoolboy!'

‘What are you so hot and bothered about?’

‘My dear fellow, try and understand somebody else’s point of view!’

‘I am astonished at you. You’ve always been so kind and understanding and now you make a fuss about nothing. You’re not acting like an intelligent man!’

‘I’m not making a fuss about nothing. But, according to you, there’s only one interesting subject in the world! You think about nothing else.’ . . . Believe me, dear Antonio, there are innumerable other things! When I was in the concentration camp I thought of so many other things; I even thought about you.’

‘What did you think about me? Tell me!’

‘That you’ve exaggerated the importance of what has happened to you. You should have taken it in your stride!’

‘You consider it unimportant?’

‘Of course I do! So would any man in any other country in the world except Italy. But to us it seems a tragedy, because we spend our lives thinking about one thing only! And, meanwhile, a tyrant boots us into war with a kick in the pants, and then we let soldiers from other countries give us another kick in the pants and take our homes away from us! Women, women! . . . Four times, five times, six times. . . . That’s what we’re obsessed with! . . . Don’t you realise that there’s nothing shameful about spending a whole life in a state of chastity? . . . You’re handsome, brought up like a gentleman, tall, strong; you can easily master any branch of art or science; you could understand anything you wanted to! . . . Just think of all the things you could have accomplished if you hadn’t shut yourself up inside a single stupid thought for the whole of your life! . . .’

'I, my dear Edoardo, have but one wish! I would be a happy man if what I dreamt about had been a fact and not a dream!'

'What a lofty ambition! What noble aspirations!'

'And then I should like to do one other thing. Meet Barbara and slap her face. And I assure you that if I were to meet her today I should slap the skin off her face, even in the presence of her father and her husband.'

'Oh, what an ambitious undertaking! That's the way to restore her lost honour to Italy, to solve all social problems. . . .'

'What the hell do I care about social problems or about Italy?'

'Of course! A man who is coping with such enormously important problems of his own . . .'

'Edoardo, if you want to know, today I hate you!'

'The same to you, my dearest Antonio. I can't think how I could have put up with your endless whining and self-pity for all these years.'

'And I can't think how I could have put up with your eternal ranting!'

'Very well, let's suspend the meeting! I salute you. When your dream has become no longer . . . a dream, put a flag out on the balcony: I'll understand. Goodbye. . . . And hang out another flag when you've slapped Barbara. Bye, bye!'

Edoardo walked down the Via Etnea, doing his best to give the soldiers a wide berth; some of them, who were the worse for drink, tried to put their hands on him; he seemed to attract them, as if he were sucking them into a vacuum cleaner.

He was still thinking about Antonio and muttering

disparaging remarks under his breath when he reached his own front door, which the porter's daughter quickly slammed shut behind him.

'Besides,' he muttered, 'I badly wanted to get so many things off my chest to him. He might have listened! . . . But now he's almost spoilt all the pleasure I felt at getting free. . . . My tongue feels as bitter as if I had swallowed poison. . . . And you, Giovanna, why did you shut the door as if it were midnight?'

'Signorino, I'm all alone and I'm frightened of the soldiers. They come in and look at me with such awful-looking eyes and want God knows what.'

'Nonsense, you know very well what they want.'

'I know nothing at all, signorino.'

'I don't believe you!'

'You can think what you like, sir, but I know nothing about it!'

'Very well then, if you really don't know, get somebody to teach you!'

'I don't want anybody to teach me anything. I don't want to learn anything from anybody!'

'Not even from me?'

'Not even from you, sir!'

'What a shy young bird you are!'

'I said no . . . leave my face alone! I'm a good girl . . . leave my hands alone! Please!'

'And what about your little nose?'

'No! . . . Oh, saints above us!'

'Well, what can I touch?'

'Nothing! . . . No, signorino, no . . . What are you doing? Blessed Madonna! . . . What's come over you?'

Edoardo did the job thoroughly, resolutely and

expeditiously; all the time he kept the same expression as before, a very disappointed and angry expression.

When he was on his feet again and had wiped his forehead, he looked down so as not to see the girl's face. It was obvious from the way she was stretching herself and slapping at her skirt that she felt bitterly insulted and impotently rebellious. He went slowly up the stairs, into his flat and took up the telephone. He dialled Antonio's number.

'Who's there? . . . Hallo. . . . Who's there? . . . But, damn it, who is it? . . . What's this, a joke? . . . Hallo, hallo, who's there?' he heard Antonio say.

Edoardo burst into a violent fit of sobbing.

'Is that you, Edoardo?'

Edoardo, after several minutes, finally managed to control his voice.

'Yes, it's me. . . . I want to beg your pardon.'

'Whatever for?'

'I had the nerve to criticise you! . . . I . . . I . . . I who am the vilest of men! I who have just . . .'

'What have you done?'

'You ought to spit on me, Antonio, when you see me next! You should trample on my face and then make me polish your shoes!'

'But what on earth have you done?'

An explosion in the far distance made the window-panes vibrate very slightly, and seemed to darken the sky.

'What have you done, tell me!'

Edoardo told him, in a voice of utter self-loathing, exactly what had happened at the bottom of the stairs. For a long time there was no answer at the other end of the line. Edoardo insisted:

'You must tell me what you think about it! Speak to me!'

Antonio said nothing at all. He was too busy envying his cousin, envying him with every drop of blood in his body!

In a world still convulsed by and in the last spasms of that collective form of epilepsy called war, it is not surprising that this narrative has deviated, several times, from strict chronological continuity.

Where is Signor Alfio? Where is that poor old man?

One night in '42 he was feeling his way very slowly along the streets towards his house; he cursed the blackout, which was responsible for his having to stagger back suddenly, from time to time, as if a door had been slammed in his face; he cursed the war and his own old age. He was still cursing when every object around him, the bricks of the street, the abandoned carriages lined up mournfully along the pavement, the walls of the houses, the starry sky and the church towers, broke out into a long and continuous lamentation, like a herd at the smell of an approaching wolf: it was the nearest siren sounding an alert.

'Tonight, my heart tells me that they won't leave a single stone standing in this accursed city!' muttered Signor Alfio to himself and turned off the street which led to his home; he felt his way along malodorous, tortuous alleyways; evil little rifts between hovels and slum tenements; anyone passing through them at night was usually accosted by one woman after another calling: 'Come in, darling! Stop for a short time!'

But that night, instead of the usual invitations, the only

sounds were the slamming of doors, a frightened panting and the rattling of bolts and bars.

Signor Alfio quickened his steps, waving his stick in front of him and hitting heaps of garbage, dogs, cats, rubble and every possible kind of refuse.

'By God, I'll die like a rat in a sewer! Hi, hi! Mariuccia, open up!'

Mariuccia, who lived at the far end of the alley, was a girl without a drop of blood showing under the skin of her face; two fat, pallid breasts hung from her emaciated chest; they were like pears that swell and ripen in springtime on the topmost, leafless branches of the tree.

'Hi, Mariuccia, for God's sake, open up!'

Signor Alfio had stopped in front of what he thought was Mariuccia's door; but there was the sound of a bolt being drawn several doors away and her face, shown up by the light inside and looking as white as a wax candle, peered out at him.

'But what brings you here, your worship, on a dog's night like this?' she asked.

Signor Alfio hurried to her door and went into her wretched hovel; the only presentable object in the room was a shiny cheap alarm clock which ticked out the minutes like a robot conductor with a tin baton.

'But how? Your worship here? If we're killed what will people say tomorrow? That Signor Alfio was in the house of a bad woman?'

'That is just what I want, I want them to find my body here! I want all of Catania to know that Alfio Magnano with all his seventy years went with . . . who . . . I beg your pardon. I don't want to offend you. If I had meant to insult you, would I have come here to die?'

'Oh, Lord have mercy upon us! Is it written that we'll surely die tonight?'

'I don't know. . . . Those hayrick burners who are flying above our heads know! They're just young hoodlums, do you know that? Just like the hoodlums who swagger down the Via Etnea at night and push people off the pavement. But this lot, instead of doing it on the Via Etnea, do it on the streets of London! And they play billiards like anybody else. They probably play it too far into the night and their fathers can't beg or bully them into coming home at a decent time. . . . But tonight they're playing with our houses and, a blow here and a blow there, you'll see that they will smash them all! . . . Yes, at this moment, everybody in Catania, you, me, the Prefect, cuckolds as well as those who've escaped being cuckolded, the Fascists and the anti-Fascists, the Duke of Bronte and that bitch of a wife of his, my son and my Rosaria, all of us without exception, are in the hands of four brainless dare-devils who can snuff us out just when and as they please, pfff, just like candles when a feast day is over!'

'Let them! I'm going out into the courtyard to call the cat.'

She opened a little door into a black hole in the middle of which stood an object of a dirty white colour, probably the lavatory.

'Heh, don't go away! I don't want them to find me here tomorrow all by myself, as if I had come to say my prayers! I want to die with a woman at my side! I think I'll take my jacket off!'

'Oh, we shan't be killed! I can think of a better treatment for that cat!'

But, in fact, they were killed. Signor Alfio, who was

esteemed and revered by the whole city, was found, after a five-day search, buried in the ruins of this notorious part of the city: a green slipper with a rose-coloured tassel, blown out of a brothel in the next street, was resting on top of him, with the toe against one temple; all that was left of Mariuccia was her right hand clutching the handle of a broom. It was not clear just what had killed Signor Alfio; there were no demonstrable injuries, his clothes were undamaged and fairly clean; in one of his trouser pockets he had carefully preserved, in a celluloid case, the note which his brother-in-law Ermenegildo had left on the dresser of his gas-filled room:

‘The burden of my life has been heavy and continuous and yet, in spite of its absurdity, it has achieved a semblance of coherence and almost of logic, the logic and reason which is inherent in all human beings.’











